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A HASTY MARRIAGE; OR, WAS SHE AN ADVENTURESS?

BY MRS. M. L. FORDHAM.



HE WAS GAZING INTENTLY AT JUDITH.

A Hasty Marriage;

OR,

Was She an Adventuress?

BY MRS. M. L. FORDHAM.

PROLOGUE.

ASBURY may possess good facilities for bathing, and the air may be salubrious and bracing, but candor compels the admission that there is a decided want of some excitement to kill the passing hour.

These were the half-spoken thoughts, conceived, more or less, in the language of the railway guide-book, which passed through the mind of a young gentleman as he stood in front of the "Atlantic Hotel," hesitating in which direction to bend his steps.

During the two days in which he had so-journed there, he had exhausted the attractions of the unpretending watering-place.

He had made pedestrian excursions both north and south—that is, as far as the sea-mark in one direction, and the village in the other. He had lounged on the pier, and tried mackerel and blue fishing from the boats of the fishermen, and he had now come to the conclusion that he would shake the dust of Asbury from his feet, and bid adieu to the place forever.

It is necessary for the purposes of this story that for the present a strict reticence should be preserved in regard to the antecedents of Mr. Clifford.

Suffice it to say that he was a good-looking young man of about twenty, possessing a poetical temperament and a very romantic disposition.

It was now the month of August, the time seven o'clock in the evening, and the weather all that it should be.

So Mr. Clifford strolled slowly along in the direction of the breezy cliff on the right of the village which commands an elevated view of the ocean, and the various craft, from yachts and fishing-smacks to the ocean steamers which occasionally heave in sight.

Availing himself of an empty bench, Mr. Clifford seated himself, prepared to enjoy the delights of a good cigar, the balmy breeze, and his own reflections.

But he was not destined to enjoy these pleasures for any length of time.

Almost before he was aware of the fact, a young girl seated herself at the other end of the bench, and immediately produced a small volume from her pocket, and was soon immersed in its contents.

Now, it must be borne in mind that circumstances alter cases.

Had Mr. Clifford come in contact with this girl amid the attractions of the city, he would in all probability have never given her a passing thought; but on this solitary cliff, in a quiet watering-place, she became an object of special interest.

He began at once to furtively criticise her profile, which was certainly a very remarkable one. It might have served as a model for an intaglio.

The artistic eye of Clifford could detect no fault in that classical outline.

Then there was the long dark eyelash, which swept the olive-brown cheek; large masses of blue-black hair were coiled up in careless convolutions at the back of her small and well-proportioned head.

In figure she was somewhat above the middle height, and that figure was of massive proportions.

Her grand sweep of limb was perceptible in the muslin costume she wore, while the rise and fall of her bosom was like the swell of the sea at even-tide.

Clifford felt he must exchange a few words with her, if only to dispel the ennui from which he was suffering.

He was a talented young man, yet he could only commence a conversation that was pregnant with such mighty results, by a commonplace remark as to the beauty of the evening.

The girl slowly turned her head, and Clifford beheld her full face for the first time.

As a rule, a profile is no guide to the characteristics of the full face.

Much as he had admired the profile, Clifford was not prepared for the exceeding loveliness which met his view.

The long, fringed lashes were now raised, disclosing a pair of the most magnificent orbs which it had ever been his lot to witness; luminous, dark, and melting in their tenderness.

But one could easily imagine them flashing with hate, or burning with indignation.

In cold and chilling tones she replied, "I do not remember ever having seen you before, sir!"

"Possibly not. If I have intruded on your studies, or committed any breach of decorum, pray pardon me."

The courteous tone of the reply appeared to have a certain effect on the haughty damsel, for she responded, "You must admit, sir, that you would not choose that a sister, if you possess one, should be exposed to the idle chatter of every stranger with whom she might chance to come in contact."

Clifford felt tempted to reply that a sister would not be allowed to wander forth alone, but he merely observed, "Do you not think it was intended when the world was made, that we should make things as pleasant as possible for one another?"

The girl turned her large eyes in some surprise at her questioner.

"You speak beyond your years, sir."

"I am not old, certainly, but I have thought much; and I have thought for myself, which is more than every one can say. The majority of persons resemble more a flock of sheep than anything else. While I despise the vulgar affectation of singularity, I hate the conventional absurdities of society. So instead of you and me returning to our several homes, moody and silent, why should we not pass a pleasant half-hour in exchanging ideas? I am a gentleman, though not a rich one; you are evidently a lady, a fact which I shall not forget if you comply with my desire to indulge in half an hour's chat."

The girl seemed amused at the singular behavior of the speaker, and smiling (disclosing two rows of pearl-like teeth as she did so), replied, "Agreed! What shall we talk about?"

"You will put it down as mere idle curiosity if I reply, yourself."

"It is certainly early days in our acquaintance for me to indulge you with particulars of my history."

"I do not expect you to do anything of the kind. But tell me what you like, and what you dislike; what is your ambition, and what constitutes your ideal of worldly happiness."

Thus these two singular specimens of humanity became involved in a metaphysical disquisition on the problems of life which have puzzled philosophers since the world began.

But the shades of evening were now gathering around them, and the girl, after consulting her watch, declared the debate must come to an end.

"Not so," said the young man, eagerly; "only adjourned! Promise me to come to this spot to-morrow evening and renew the discussion."

But the girl shook her head, and, with a musical laugh, replied that she could make no promises.

"At all events, I shall be here; on that you may depend," said Clifford.

The girl merely bowed, and walked slowly away in the direction of the village.

Clifford watched her retreating figure as it swept along the grassy cliff with all the grace of an Eastern queen.

He returned to his hotel, fully resolved upon one thing—he would remain at Asbury a day or two longer.

He counted the hours till the time arrived for his visit to the cliff. He was punctual, but no graceful figure put in its appearance.

The next evening, and the next, were equally unsuccessful. He resolved to make one more attempt, and then leave Asbury forever.

He could scarcely believe his eyes; there was the majestic and fascinating stranger sitting precisely on the identical seat on which he had first beheld her, and reading apparently the same volume.

Clifford felt his pulse beat more quickly as he raised his hat in reply to her fascinating smile of welcome. "I feared you had left Asbury, and—"

"Would that have distressed you very much?" interrupted the fair one.

"How can you doubt it?" replied Clifford.

"Pray do not let us talk ordinary badinage," exclaimed the girl, "or I shall be sorry I came to meet you."

Clifford seated himself by her side.

"I do not wish to be impertinent, but will you not give me some name by which I can address you?"

"You can call me Judith. It is a strange name, is it not? You would never have guessed it!"

"There is no other name which would be so appropriate!" replied Clifford, emphatically.

"How so?"

"You will be offended if I tell you."

"On my honor, no!"

"I can picture you standing by the bedside of Holofernes, with bared arm, saber in hand, those dark eyes flashing, and that blue-black hair lying in tumbled masses on your neck, the while you uttered a prayer to Jehovah for strength to deliver the fatal blow."

"And your name is—"

"My name is Clifford."

"In your case, equally appropriate. Poetical as your speech."

The youthful pair discoursed on every conceivable topic, and the sun had set, and the harvest moon was shining over the broad expanse of water ere they once more bade each other good-night. But ere they parted a mutual promise had been given to meet again on the following evening.

We will not give in detail the particulars of the several interviews. Suffice it to say that by the end of the week Clifford had only learned that the name of his companion was Judith Swaine, that she was five-and-twenty, had a little money, and no relatives of any kind.

He could not complain of any reticence on her part, for all he cared to divulge with respect to himself was that his name was Henry Clifford, that he was twenty, was related to a good family, and possessed a small income of his own.

If ever woman possessed the fatal gift of fascination, that woman was Judith Swaine!

The celebrated women in history who are described as fascinating can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

From Cleopatra, the dusky enslaver of Marc Antony, to Marie Stuart, who rendered all who came in contact with her the slaves of her world-renowned charms.

Heaven grant that every male reader of this story may not be exposed to the dangerous fascination of such a woman as Judith Swaine!

Prudence and self-control in such a case are simply as straws on the the surface of a running stream, with as much power for resisting the current which burries them onward.

It was the final meeting, and Judith and Clifford had strolled along the firm sands till they had left Asbury a considerable distance behind them.

The low, monotonous dash of the waves at their feet was the only sound which broke the deathlike stillness.

The moon was slowly rising over the waste of waters, and Judith and Clifford, as they stood, her head resting on his shoulder, while one of his arms encircled her waist, scarcely

dared to breathe lest they should dissolve the charm of those blissful moments.

"It is impossible for me to say farewell, Judith. Why should we not unite our fortunes and lives? I do not seek to know more of you and your past than you have chosen to tell me; I only know that I love you, that no other woman while you live shall ever be my wife!"

The girl raised her dark eyes, which sparkled with an unnatural glitter in the moonlight, and looking into his as though they would pierce their inmost depths, exclaimed:

"And you would wed with one who may be anything—an adventuress for all you know! You in the first flush of your youth, and, as you have told me, with wealthy and influential relatives!"

"Judith, were I a millionaire, with a thousand haughty relatives, I would equally offer you my hand, and think myself the most fortunate of mankind by your accepting it."

The girl paused as if in doubt, then a great sob came from her heaving bosom, and throwing herself upon his breast she exclaimed, in convulsive accents:

"Heaven help me! I thought all happiness was gone for me. If fate allows it, I will be to you a loving, helpful wife while life shall last."

With slow and lingering steps the pair strolled back to the little village an engaged couple, with no relatives on either side to consult, to congratulate them, or to express disapproval of their choice.

Among the visitors who examined the pictorial and architectural wonders of Antwerp, none were more enthusiastic than Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clifford.

Judith Swaine had become the wife of Clifford as soon after the evening on the sands of Asbury, we have just described, as the matter could be accomplished.

With the dislike of all ordinary customs and their mutual contempt for what they termed the conventionalities of the nineteenth century, they had been content with a marriage at the mayor's office in New York, and the next day sailed for Europe, where they intended to spend their honeymoon in traveling.

It was their intention to make a tour through Germany, France and Italy, and finally settle wherever it might please them, abandoning at once their place of abode the instant it was found to be dull or irksome in the slightest degree. Verily, there were not two more perfect specimens of the species we are accustomed to call Bohemians in the habitable globe.

And they were happy, without a thought or care for the future, with no visions of failure of health, or the weaknesses and pains of old age, to cast a shade over the present happy time.

Clifford felt proud of his handsome wife as she walked by his side, her glorious features radiant with excitement, and words sparkling with wit and humor falling from her lovely lips. Many a titled foreigner, many a humble peasant, turned their heads to have another look at the handsome American couple, as they sped through the city from one sight to another.

As soon as Antwerp was exhausted they took train to Brussels, and making the "Hotel Belle Vue" their head-quarters, were quickly absorbed in the gay sights of that miniature Paris.

Clifford was an admirable French scholar, and under his guidance the time passed pleasantly away.

He often asked himself if the world were really a vale of tears, as described by the preacher and the philosopher.

For his part, he would have been perfectly content if time itself could have stood still, and Judith and he could remain at their present age; neither older nor younger; passing their time as they were now doing—listening to the military band in the Parc of an evening, under the cool murmuring of the acacia trees; sip-

ping ices; conversing with each other; and reading love and happiness in each other's eyes.

But Clifford was soon destined to experience the fatal truth that no worldly happiness is of long continuance—that beneath the flower of joy oft lurks the asp of danger.

A presentiment of this kind would sometimes cross his mind; but he would drive it from him with an effort, and again endeavor, in every possible way, to extract the full meed of happiness from the passing moment, and as he looked into the joyous face of Judith, he would murmur:

"Surely no cloud can possibly arise to overshadow such happiness as mine!"

In spite of himself, he could not help experiencing a considerable amount of natural curiosity as to the previous life of the woman he had made his wife.

On one occasion they were sitting in their usual place in the Parc, and Judith appearing in a more communicative mood than usual, he ventured to remark:

"Dear Judith, I wish you would talk to me a little about your past life; I should like to know what you were doing, and with whom you were associating, in the days when I knew you not."

The countenance of Judith instantly became somber, and her eye dull and lusterless.

"Harry, did you not promise me when I consented to become your wife that you would never question me as to my past history?"

"I did, Judith; but now you know me better, I think that condition might be abrogated."

"Never, Harry," replied Judith, in sad and mournful tones; "you must not seek to know one tittle of my career previous to the day I first saw you on the beach at Asbury. But I swear that there is nothing in my past life which would not allow the fiercest light to be turned on it. Be satisfied with that, dear Harry. Recollect I have never asked you a single question as to your private history. I have taken you for what you seem to be—a courteous, honorable gentleman. What can any woman desire more in the husband of her choice?"

"Enough, dear Judith. I will be content with the knowledge that I have the handsomest and best wife in the world!"

The eyes of Judith beamed love and gratitude as she listened to these words.

From that moment Clifford never questioned her more.

He dated his happiness from that eventful evening when he made her acquaintance in so unusual a manner.

In two or three weeks the indefatigable explorers grew weary of the sights of Brussels, and Clifford suggested Paris as their next happy hunting-ground.

Judith almost clapped her hands with delight. The prospect of a winter in Paris, with so agreeable a companion as Clifford, with a husband she loved so fondly, was indeed a pleasant one. Never before had she displayed such buoyant spirits.

Clifford became infected with her cheerfulness, and wondered at his recent nervous fears as to the non-continuance of his happiness.

They resolved to pay a farewell visit to the Parc, and listen to the evening concert under the acacias for the last time.

It was a lovely evening, and Clifford was content to sit and watch the elegant play of her lovely features as she discoursed with more than her usual animation.

Suddenly she paused; her eyes became fixed with a glassy stare; the color left her cheek; even her trembling lips grew white, as she slowly raised her hand and pointed to a group of persons in front of her.

Clifford instinctively turned his eyes in that direction, and beheld a man standing somewhat apart from the crowd which thronged the Parc. He was gazing intently at Judith.

During the momentary glance Clifford bestowed upon him, he observed that he was

somewhat shabbily dressed and bore the appearance of an American of the middle class.

But any further examination was rendered impossible by a hollow groan which escaped the lips of Judith as she fell senseless from her chair.

A crowd instantly gathered round, as is customary in such cases, and were with some difficulty persuaded to give the sufferer air by a gentleman, who described himself as a medical man.

It is a very short distance from the Parc of Brussels to the "Hotel Belle Vue;" and thither Judith was speedily conveyed.

Some little time elapsed ere she recovered consciousness; but the moment that took place she glanced nervously round, and appeared relieved at the absence of some dread object.

As soon as possible Clifford besought his wife to explain the cause of her sudden and unaccountable indisposition. Had it any reference to a stranger who was contemplating her with such a wistful gaze?

But Judith professed herself quite unable to account for the attack, and denied having observed the man to whom Clifford alluded.

During the two following days Judith appeared ill at ease, although evidently making considerable efforts to look otherwise. But Clifford decided that her nervous system had experienced a shock, which only required time to dissipate.

On the third morning Judith expressed a wish to do some shopping, and playfully asked her husband not to accompany her.

"It is all very well, Harry, to say that you like to go shopping with me; but there never was a husband yet who cared to go shopping with his wife. A newly-married man may think he likes doing so, but he don't; so oblige me for once, Harry."

"My dear, if you really prefer shopping without me, by all means do so."

Judith kissed her husband affectionately on the cheek, and departed on her errand, while Clifford went into the smoking-room, and read the American and foreign journals.

In less than an hour Judith returned, and showed her husband some bargains in lace which she had made in the Gallery St. Hubert.

The following day she said she must pay a second visit to the lace shop, to effect certain exchanges of lace, and advised her husband to pass the time during which she should be absent in the billiard-room at the hotel, and then the time would not appear so long. Clifford consented, and then Judith turned somewhat pale, and kissed her husband on the cheek.

"I think husband and wife should never part without a kiss, no matter how brief may be the period of absence." Then a melancholy smile lit up her pale features as she proceeded. "You know, Harry, life is very short and very uncertain, and we might never meet again."

"Gracious, Judith! what a notion! You have not recovered from your nervous attack, that is quite evident! I shall insist on going with you, if you talk in that way."

"No, no! There is no need—indeed, there is not! Come, let me see you go to the billiard-room."

He obeyed, turning round to look at Judith as she stood in the open doorway of their sitting-room. He was struck by the unearthly pallor of her face. He made an attempt to return, but she smilingly waved him away; and he entered the billiard-room.

He played with indifferent success for a couple of hours, and then returned to his apartments, and inquired if Mrs. Clifford had come back.

The waiter answered in the negative, and asked if he should bring luncheon.

In spite of being more than usually hungry, Clifford decided to wait the return of his wife. But hour after hour passed away, and still she came not.

He proceeded to the lace shop in the Gallery

St. Hubert. Mrs. Clifford had not been in the shop that day, although she had made some purchases the day before.

He reeled home like a drunken man; a nameless fear took possession of him; a dread of he knew not what caused his teeth to chatter, and his mouth and tongue to become parched.

He had just decided on seeking the aid of the police to recover his lost wife when a letter was brought to him by the waiter of the hotel. Tearing it hastily open he read as follows:

"DEAR HARRY:—You must try and bear up under the heavy blow that has fallen upon us. You and I can never meet again. When I declared to you that my past life had been free from any but venial faults, I only spoke the truth. Could you see the whole of that life, you would pity me and forgive the step I am now taking. I am simply performing my duty in leaving you. It was never intended that mortals should continue in such happiness as that which we have enjoyed in the society of each other since the day we first met on the sands at Asbury. The memory of those days will support me in the thorny path of duty that lies before me, as I hope it will you. Seek not to trace me. Even if you found me it would be useless. I could not return to you. Why need I write more? I have only to add that I shall always wish for your happiness, and never cease to think of you.

"Farewell, dear Harry, forever!

"Your broken-hearted,

"JUDITH."

Clifford sat as though he were in a trance, with the open letter in his hand.

His presentiments of evil had indeed been fulfilled, and his cup of misery was full to overflowing.

The future lay before him as a dreary waste. The sandy Desert of Sahara was a field of roses in comparison with his now desolate and blighted life.

CHAPTER I.

AN EARTHLY PARAGON.

THE young millionaire, Mr. Henry Clifford, was an object of envy to the majority of his male acquaintances, and was regarded as the chief prize in the matrimonial market by the whole of the feminine portion of the world in which he moved.

He was barely thirty years of age, was handsome, clever and accomplished, and had five years back fallen heir to the whole immense fortune of his old bachelor uncle, Mr. Gregory Astor, of New York.

In addition to a magnificent residence on Fifth avenue, he owned a cottage at Newport and a most charming country villa at Cornwall-on-the-Hudson, and his income was not less than fifty thousand a year.

His amiability of disposition was admitted by every one who came in contact with him, though none could deny that he was a man of somewhat eccentric views as to life and morals.

But though he was such a favorite of fortune, his temperament was gloomy in the extreme. Occasionally he would unbend under the influence of the cheerful society of witty men and pretty women, but it was only for a time.

As his charity was unbounded, and his good-nature and generosity proverbial, his melancholy temperament only created a feeling of sympathy in the hearts of every one who knew him.

Marriage with some lovely member of the aristocratic world was more than once prescribed as an anodyne for his mental depression, but the suggestion was more distasteful to him than any other could have been.

But of late rumor had coupled the name of Miss Caroline Balfour, the only child of General Balfour, with the wealthy owner of Maplewood Villa.

The country seats of Clifford and Balfour were contiguous, and it would seem but natural if the two properties should become united by a marriage.

At the present moment General Balfour and his lovely daughter were on a visit to Maplewood, and we may at once confess that "Rumor, with her hundred tongues," was not very wide of the truth when it whispered a

probable union between the neighboring families.

We must ask the reader to suppose that ten years had elapsed since the mysterious flight of Judith Clifford from her young husband at Brussels.

It is a bright morning in September, and Mr. Clifford is seated in his library, engaged in writing letters. He is certainly a very handsome man, and his clear-cut, aristocratic features would be pronounced faultless but for the permanent expression of gloom which ever overshadows them.

Presently the door opens, and a countenance of a very different type peeps into the room.

"May I come in, Clifford?" Something almost approaching to a smile flickers across the pale features of the host as he cordially invites his guest to enter.

Adolphus Wickham is a man of middle age, rather short, and very stout. His round rubicund visage beams with happiness and good temper. At least, that is the normal expression, but at this present moment a trace of anxiety is plainly perceptible on his good-humored countenance.

It may be permitted to mention that he was generally called "Dolly" by his friends and associates, an abbreviation of the Christian name of Adolphus.

"But you are busy, Harry?"

"No; I have just written the last word of a heavy batch of correspondence, so take a chair, Dolly. How is it you are not one of the shooting-party this morning? Have you exhausted all my woodcock and partridges?"

"My dear Clifford, the game in your woods is like your generosity and good-nature, inexhaustible. No; I wanted to have a few minutes' quiet chat with you on a subject of the utmost importance."

Again an approach to a smile lighted up the pale, intellectual features of his friend.

"I was not aware that you regarded anything in this world as of the slightest importance, Dolly."

"True; I admit I take the world as easily as fate will permit. But this is a new phase. I expect to find myself shortly in an entirely new character, as the actors say. I am rehearsing the part of *Benedick*."

"Indeed! Who is the fortunate damsel?"

Mr. Wickham sighed heavily ere he proceeded.

"Ah! there is the rub. I have a rival, I fear."

"I will lay odds on your chance, Dolly."

Wickham shook his head.

"You would not be so rash if you knew the name of my competitor. It is no less formidable a person than the owner of Maplewood."

A red flush passed rapidly over the features of his friend.

"I do not understand you, I confess."

"In two words, Harry, I love Miss Caroline Balfour, and it is in everybody's mouth that you are the favorite in that quarter. If you were not a very intimate friend, Harry, I would not speak to you thus."

In somewhat cold and measured tones Clifford replied:

"I can only advise that you test the matter at once, and speak to the lady without regard to rival claimants."

"And you will not be offended, Harry?"

"Not in the least, Dolly."

Wickham rose from his seat, and remarked:

"By Jove! I will take your advice and without any delay. Miss Caroline is alone in the drawing-room at this moment."

As the door closed on the departing suitor, Clifford rested his cheek upon his hand, and remained absorbed in dark and melancholy thoughts.

Some vision of past days was flitting through his mind, the while Wickham was laying his hand and fortune at the feet of the lovely Mademoiselle Balfour in the drawing-room.

How long the wooing lasted Clifford could never tell, but he was still in the dreamy

reverie when Wickham once more entered the room.

The face of the suitor was almost as woe-begone as his friend's, and it needed no prophet to interpret the result of the venture.

"The die is cast; the battle has been fought and lost!"

"Miss Balfour has refused you?" exclaimed Clifton, with a joyous tone in spite of his effort to avoid it.

"Miss Balfour has declined the honor of being Mrs. Wickham, and the race for you, Harry, is simply a walk-over. However, I do not repent having solved the problem. I never could stand suspense of any kind, and now I think I will go and meet the sportsmen. I feel as if the breeze would blow away some of the cobwebs of defeat."

Shortly after Wickham had left, Mr. Clifford locked his writing-desk, and went to the drawing-room, where he found Caroline Balfour engaged in some crewel work.

The daughter of General Balfour was now about twenty. Tall and fragile in figure, with the lightest possible brown hair, a complexion like wax, with the faintest tinge of color on her marble cheeks, she would have served as an admirable model for a water-spirit, had a tableau of Undine been required.

Caroline raised her large, liquid blue eyes to the owner of Maplewood as he entered the drawing-room, and a smile of exceeding loveliness overspread her delicate features.

Mr. Clifford almost fancied there was a deeper blush than ordinary on her cheek; but as he mentally observed, that may have been the result of the folly of Wickham in supposing he was a suitable mate for the ethereal being before him.

"Why are you not with papa, Mr. Clifford? I know he looked forward with pleasure to your company at the shooting this morning."

"My dear Miss Balfour some one once observed that property has its duties as well as its rights. I would vary the saying thus: Property has its pains as well as its pleasures. It is impossible to leave everything to a steward. At all events, he cannot write one's private correspondence. I sometimes sigh for the day when I was a youth with a small income, and not a care in the world."

"Yet I am sure you appreciate the vast opportunities you possess of doing good—opportunities, which you will forgive my saying, you avail yourself of so liberally."

It was always a treat to listen to the voice of Caroline Balfour; at least, so thought Mr. Clifford. The accents were so silvery and so sympathetic in their tones.

"I merely endeavor to do my duty, Miss Balfour."

Then the thoughts of Clifford reverted to the words of Wickham, how common report had settled that Miss Balfour was to be Mrs. Henry Clifford.

He had been so careful in his intercourse with the Balfour family as not to betray the secret wishes of his heart, yet those wishes were known to every one in the neighborhood.

He wondered whether the principal person concerned suspected the state of his affections.

Would it not be wise to ask her to be his wife without further delay, and did not the present opportunity afford a favorable chance?

But fortune willed it otherwise.

General Balfour entered the room at this moment, radiant with his success over the partridges and woodcock, accompanied by Mr. Wickham.

The general was an ordinary type of the old military man, gray and bluff, and choleric and good-natured.

"Ah, Clifford! you have missed a glorious morning's sport! I am afraid, Caroline, you have been detaining our kind host from a royal good shooting."

"No, indeed, papa! Mr. Clifford has only just come from the library."

The old general would have been better

pleased if Clifford had been in the society of his daughter the whole of the morning; for it was the dearest wish of his heart that his daughter should become Harry Clifford's wife.

"Miss Balfour has not been without society during your absence, general," said Clifford somewhat maliciously, with a sly glance at Wickham. "Mr. Wickham has been her companion the greater part of the morning."

It would be difficult to say which of the parties referred to blushed the deeper.

Mr. Clifford announced that luncheon had been ready for some time, and the quartette adjourned to the dining room, where they found the rest of the guests, as hungry as hunters, and buoyant with health and good spirits.

During the meal Clifford made an inward vow that he would not allow four-and-twenty hours to pass over his head without satisfying himself that the affections of the lovely Caroline Balfour were unappropriated.

CHAPTER II.

A PRESENTIMENT.

As Caroline Balfour was the only lady staying at Maplewood, the owner was enabled to find the opportunity he wished during the hours which succeeded dinner in the evening.

Two whist-tables were formed, and as Caroline expressed no desire to play, Mr. Clifford led her to the piano in the second drawing-room, and seating himself close to the instrument, was soon lapped in Elysium as he listened to a dreamy *nocturne* of Chopin as rendered by the taper fingers of his lovely guest.

Caroline wore a dress of ivory satin, and in her hair was placed a cluster of salvia, the vivid blossoms mingling with her sunny locks.

Clifford could not help confessing that he had never beheld a more fairy-like vision of ethereal beauty.

Then there was the exquisitely modulated voice, so pure and limpid, that it almost realized what the imagination might picture of an angel singing in Paradise.

"Do not cease to play, Caroline!" murmured Harry. "Let the players continue their game. I do not wish to be overheard. Will you come and live at Maplewood? Will you be my companion, dear Caroline? Will you be my wife?"

Every vestige of color left the cheek of the lovely performer, while her fingers trembled so that the notes of Chopin were but indifferently rendered.

So excessive was her emotion, that Clifford whispered, "Come into the garden; the cool air will revive you."

The lovers stepped through the lofty open French windows, and in a moment were treading the greensward of the lawn in front of the house.

The balmy breeze from the river recalled the color to the cheek of the trembling fair one; and in tender accents her lover proceeded.

"Pardon my impatience; I was too precipitate. Yet I think you must have seen ere now that I loved you. You must have been prepared for this avowal. Tell me, did you not know that my heart was yours, and yours alone?"

Caroline turned her large blue eyes upon her lover—those eyes full of candor and maidenly purity—and in a tone so low as scarcely to be audible, murmured: "I thought you loved me."

"And you, dear Caroline, you return my affection, do you not? Say yes, darling!"

The only answer vouchsafed by Caroline was a slight pressure of her tiny fingers as they clasped the hand of Clifford who imprinted a gentle kiss on her brow.

Instinctively they returned to the drawing-room, for their hearts were too full for words, and Caroline yearned for the privacy of her room, where she could unperceived shed happy tears of joy.

The whist-players had just finished their rub-

ber, and Mr. Clifford drew General Balfour on one side.

"I wish to speak to you at once, dear general. My heart is so full of the happiness in store for me. I have told Caroline that I love her, and asked her to be my wife. Have I your consent, general?"

General Balfour was unable to utter a syllable in reply.

The announcement had come so suddenly that, though he saw the dearest wish of his heart on the point of realization, his speech completely failed him for a few seconds.

The other turned pale.

"Ah, you have other views for Miss Balfour! I have been too premature!"

"Not so, my dear boy," responded the general, in emphatic tones. "I am delighted beyond measure. It is no flattery to say that the owner of Maplewood could aspire to the hand of a princess. But I am sure you will believe me when I say that, apart from all those considerations, there is no one whose character I respect more than I do yours; and, further, I don't mind telling you that I have long fancied that my dear child had lost her heart to you, though no hint of the sort has ever fallen from her lips. Well, she has found a good husband, and, though I say it, you have found a good wife."

And the general wiped away a tear of emotion as he concluded his somewhat lengthy oration.

Clifford grasped the hand of his old friend with cordiality.

"I am the happiest of men!"

"I am rejoiced to hear you say so; and I trust a happy married life will help to remove that cloud—that unaccountable gloom—which has furnished so prolific a theme for all the gossips of the neighborhood."

Balfour presently left the room, eager, no doubt, to congratulate his daughter on her good fortune.

The rest of the company were now split up into sets of whist and chess, save Dolly Wickham, who, crossing the room to where Clifford was ensconced in an arm-chair, affecting to be engaged in the perusal of one of the quarterlies, tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Harry, I am about to commit a breach of good manners. I saw the exit of Miss Caroline, first into the garden, and then from the room, blushing like a peony. I could not help perceiving also the animated manner of the general. Am I right? Is it a walk-over, as I prognosticated? I am the only person in the world privileged to put such a question, you will admit."

Clifford hesitated for a moment; then answered, "Yes."

Wickham shrugged his shoulders, and in rueful tones replied, "Comprehensive and mighty monosyllable! Well, Harry, I congratulate you most sincerely! Jove! there are few women who can boast of two offers of marriage in one day! I was heavily handicapped. You have the advantage in age and weight, and, I was about to add, and the money on. But any woman would be glad to marry you with one-twentieth of your wealth."

The fact of the engagement of Caroline Balfour and Henry Clifford was soon known throughout the entire circle of their acquaintances.

Not much surprise was expressed, as the event accorded so exactly with the prophecies of the majority.

Mr. Clifford urged an early performance of the ceremony, as he was heartily weary of his solitary existence; and as there was no lack of worldly means, and the ages offered no impediment, General Balfour consented to the marriage taking place in the following December.

Of course the bride must have a reasonable length of time in which to order and prepare her trousseau, and Clifford, too, desired the opportunity to get his business affairs in order, for, as soon as they were married, he intended taking Caroline South for the winter.

Shakespeare has recorded how time ambles

with some and gallops with others; but the fact remains indisputable that, however impatient we may be, the long-looked-for day will come in due season.

It was the eve of the bridal.

Harry had galloped over to Balfour Hall to have a delicious hour with his betrothed.

Ah, that memorable hour, so bright with anticipation, when we can hardly realize the fact that in a brief space the being we love best on earth will be our very own, never more to be parted from us while life shall last!

The lovers sat in the magnificent drawing-room of Balfour Hall, silent and happy.

No words could have expressed their rapture, which beamed in eloquent glances from their eyes.

They were occupied in turning over the leaves of a gorgeously bound book, illustrative of the wonders of Italian art, but their thoughts were otherwise employed.

The sweet consciousness that they loved and were beloved excluded every other thought; and a nervous apprehension lest some unexpected and unlooked-for evil should mar their coming joy was the only speck on their horizon of bliss.

Clifford at length rose to depart.

"Our last farewell, dearest! Never more will my lips utter the word 'good-by!' I can scarcely realize the fact that a few hours will effect such a wondrous change!"

Caroline held the hand of her lover with a detaining clasp.

"Tell me, Harry, do you believe in presentiment?"

"Never, Caroline, except when I am out of health. You have no fear, darling?"

Caroline cast down her eyes, and her hand trembled perceptibly.

"I do not know; but I feel as if something were about to happen. Something tells me that our marriage will never take place."

"It is simply a matter of nerves, believe me, Caroline."

A few moments more, and the lovers had said their farewell.

It was a bright, frosty day, and the keen, crisp air served to remove the temporary depression caused by the forebodings of his betrothed in the mind of Henry Clifford. A ride of a few minutes, and he alighted at his own door.

As Mr. Clifford entered the house, a footman informed him that there was a lady in the library who desired to speak with him.

"A lady! Did she give no name?"

"No, sir."

"Tell her I will be with her presently."

In spite of himself, the forebodings of his betrothed recurred to his mind, but he partly shook them off, and proceeded to the library.

A lady rose from her seat as he entered the apartment, but spoke never a word.

Sternly but sadly she fixed her large, dark eyes upon him.

He had never, save once, seen eyes like those he now beheld.

Clifford advanced toward her with slow and faltering steps, his cheek blanched, and his whole frame in a tremor.

Still the woman spoke not.

A few seconds more of prolonged gazing, and then the owner of Maplewood sunk into a chair in a half-swoon, as one word escaped his pale and trembling lips—"Judith!"

CHAPTER III.

A VICTIM OF FATE.

THE reader will no doubt long ere this have recognized in the owner of Maplewood the same Henry Clifford who, ten years before, had made such a thoughtless marriage as union with a person of whose antecedents he knew nothing, and who deserted him a few weeks after marriage in such a mysterious manner.

At the time we introduced him to the reader he was merely a young man with a small income left him by his father, and no expectations of ever being any wealthier.

His uncle on his mother's side, Mr. Gregory Astor, was an eccentric old gentleman, a bachelor, who had positively asserted many a time that all his wealth was to go to various charitable institutions which he named.

But merry Harry with his warm heart and thoughtless ways, had won a place in the old man's affections, which no other relative could have done, and he secretly determined that his will should be altered, although he gave not a hint of such a resolution to any one but his lawyer. Upon his death which occurred almost immediately after Harry's return from abroad, it was found that he had left all his property, with the exception of a few slight bequests, to his nephew, and thus Harry found himself a millionaire in the midst of his affliction.

Soon after the flight of Judith he availed himself of the services of the secret police at Brussels, and they reported that two persons of the name of Swaine, a male and female, had taken passages in an emigrant ship which sailed from Antwerp for New York. The characteristic name of the woman was Judith, and the vessel was called the Zealand.

In about ten days news came that the Zealand had foundered at sea, but that a large portion of the crew had taken to the boats, and had been duly picked up by an outward-bound ship. But in the list of passengers thus saved Clifford searched in vain for the name of Swaine.

As months rolled by, and no tidings came of his missing bride, Clifford came to the natural conclusion that Judith Clifford had gone to her account.

Her desertion had soured the temper and imparted a somber tone to Clifford's naturally cheerful temperament. He felt he had been deceived where he had placed implicit confidence, and he almost vowed that he would never place trust in man or woman more.

By degrees these bitter views of life became more sweetened, and when he made the acquaintance of the youthful Caroline, he confessed that there was still some joy and promise of happiness left in his cup of life.

But now these hopes were dashed to the earth by the return of the woman who was his legal wife and the true Mrs. Clifford.

The reader may perhaps remark that Henry Clifford ought to experience sensations of joy at the restoration to life of the once loved Judith. But there were three reasons why this could not be.

The first was, that he felt indignant at her unexplained flight from one who she knew loved her so fondly.

The second was, that the lapse of ten years had afforded him ample time to consider and reconsider the folly of the act he had been guilty of when he married a woman who was almost a total stranger to him.

The third reason was, that the woman who now stood before him was not the same Judith who listened to the military band under the acacias in the park at Brussels ten years ago!

He had some difficulty in recognizing her. There were still traces of the marvelous beauty left which had fascinated the boy Clifford at the sea-shore. But the figure had become bulky, the eye had lost its luster, the face its form, and the whole expression gave one the idea that temperance was not a prominent virtue of the once lovely Judith Swaine.

Clifford sat lost in gloomy thoughts, his face buried in his hands.

"Is this your welcome, Harry, after ten long weary years of absence and exile?"

He rose to his feet.

"Whose fault was it that you underwent those years of exile?"

"Not my fault, Harry. I was the victim of a cruel fate."

Clifford made a gesture of impatience.

"Pshaw! you forget you are no longer talking to a boy of twenty, full of poetry and romance. You are speaking to one who is thirty in years, and fifty in experience. Sit

down. Tell me the cause of your sudden flight from Brussels ten years ago. Had that man I saw in the Parc anything to do with it?"

"That man was the cause. He is my brother."

"Then he still lives?"

"He does."

"Why should a brother wish you to leave a husband you had just married?"

"That I am not at liberty to explain," replied Judith, in a firm and callous tone of voice.

"Not at liberty. But you must and shall explain."

Judith smiled a sad and weary smile.

"Listen to me, Harry Clifford. The days of the question or torture are past; but no torture that was ever devised by Christian persecution could draw from me the explanation of my flight ten years ago."

Clifford was fain to confess that he believed her. Torquemada himself would have deemed the imposition of the torture a useless ceremony had he witnessed those stony features, so relentless and determined in their expression.

He sighed.

"Will you tell me what object you have in coming here this day? Do you want money?"

Judith stared at her questioner in blank amazement.

"Object! For what object does a wife return to her husband? I have come to claim my rights as Mrs. Henry Clifford!"

"What! Live here with me as my wife? That shall never be! I will make you a suitable allowance, and we will live apart; and I will return—God help me!—to my hermit life once more."

"You have no power, Harry, to send me hence."

"Indeed? What law will compel a husband to live with his wife against his will, when he is ready and willing to make her a handsome settlement to live apart?"

"I can institute a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights—which rights I have never forfeited by any misconduct."

A cold sweat broke over the face and brow of the unhappy man as his position rose before him.

To lose the lovely Caroline Balfour was bitter enough; but to be tied to the wretched woman he now saw before him—to have her constantly with him at "bed and board," to quote the law to which Judith Clifford had threatened to appeal—this was so horrible that he could not bear to contemplate it for a moment.

"You have not told me whether you were a passenger on board the ship Zealand, which met with with so disastrous a fate?"

"My brother and I were passengers on the Zealand; we were saved by a miracle. I will tell you the whole story some winter evening, when we are sitting like Darby and Joan over the fire of logs. It will serve to while away the time perhaps."

Clifford shuddered.

"When will you call again?"

"Call again, Harry? Never! I am at home, and mean to remain here. All my baggage is in the hall. And there is one thing I want to tell you, Harry, you need not be under the smallest apprehension that I shall ever 'slope' again."

Judith looked round at the magnificent apartment, and laughed a low, mocking laugh.

"No, Harry, my skeddaddling days are over. When a woman reaches thirty-five she may be fairly called a middle-aged woman. By the by, Harry, there is one point on which I never deceived you—my age. You can never cast that in my teeth."

During the speech of Judith her husband had been revolving in his mind the course of action it would be most prudent to pursue. Prudence said, temporize. He resolved to follow the dictates of prudence.

"If I consent to your remaining here for a

few days, will you agree to do so as Mrs. Carleton?"

Judith hesitated, but only for a few seconds.

"I agree to pass as Mrs. Carleton, for three days, but not an hour longer."

He rung the bell, and when the servant appeared, said, "This lady, Mrs. Carleton, will remain at Maplegrove for a few days. Please send the housekeeper to me." Then turning to Judith, he continued, "I must go at once to General Balfour. You are doubtlessly aware that this is the eve of my marriage with his daughter."

Judith yawned, and took up the *Herald*, which lay upon the table.

"I heard something about it. Of course, all that nonsense is at an end now."

"For the present, I grant," replied Clifford. "Ah! here is Mrs. Jenkins."

He said a few words to his housekeeper, and bowing to Judith, left the room.

There was not a moment to be lost. General Balfour must be informed of the state of affairs, and the marriage with Caroline must be postponed. And on General Balfour must devolve the task of breaking the cruel intelligence to his daughter. That was a duty which Harvey felt was completely beyond his powers.

In a very short time he arrived at Balfour Hall. Fortunately the old general was alone in the drawing-room.

"Ah, Clifford, I am afraid Caroline is making a call in the neighborhood; but I understand you have already seen her to-day! My God, Harry, what is the matter?"

Clifford sunk into a chair.

"General Balfour, I am the bearer of dreadful news."

Then Harris told the general as briefly as possible the remarkable story of his imprudent marriage with Judith Swaine, at the mayor's office in New York, ten years before.

The poor old general listened with horror-stricken features to the dreadful story.

"Now, my dear general, what do you advise? Is there no escape from this bond of misery?"

"None. The woman is perfectly right in the views laid down. It is a legal marriage, and she can compel you to provide her with bed and board under your roof, in the absence of any proof of misconduct on her part. She can also claim her right to her third of your property. Of course if by a large bribe you could persuade her to accept a separate maintenance you would thereby be relieved of her presence and society; but from your account, she seems to have determined on a different course. But I tremble to think of the consequences to my poor child!"

The general covered his face with his hands, and groaned aloud in very bitterness of spirit.

"How shall I tell her—how shall I tell her?"

"Can you not break the blow," said Clifford, "by saying that the marriage may be set aside after certain investigations?"

"I will do the best I can, my boy, you may be sure."

In agonized tones Harry exclaimed:

"I am a coward—I own it; but if my soul's salvation depended on my breaking the news to Caroline, I could not do it. I would face perdition instead."

"Leave it to me, Harry. A father can do it better than a lover. And now leave me; I must think over in quiet and solitude the mode of executing my task. God bless you and give you courage to endure the bitter disappointment!"

Harry wrung the hand of the grief-stricken old man, and bade him farewell.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD HOMESTEAD.

THE news soon spread far and wide that the marriage between the wealthy Harry Clifford and the lovely daughter of General Balfour was broken off, and many were the conjectures as to the cause of the rupture.

Clifford received a few brief lines from Caroline. They were as follows:

"DEAR MR. CLIFFORD:—

"Papa has told me all. Believe me, my principal sorrow is for you, because I am certain you loved me dearly.

"Ever your sincere friend and well-wisher,
"CAROLINE BALFOUR."

On the second day after the return of Judith Clifford to her husband it became known that the first wife of Harry Clifford had come to life again, and would at once assume her rights as such.

Mr. Clifford resolved upon his course of action after a sleepless night.

He sent a note to Mrs. Clifford, asking to see her in the library.

Judith appeared habited in a black velvet dress, which had the effect in some degree of diminishing her apparent bulk.

She had evidently taken more than ordinary pains with her personal appearance, and certainly presented a somewhat stately aspect.

Judith seated herself with great composure, and carelessly fanning herself, exclaimed:

"Well, Harry, is it to be peace or war?"

"Neither one nor the other!" exclaimed Clifford. "Peace is henceforth a stranger to this breast, and I have no spirit or heart for war."

"I cannot perceive any middle course," replied Judith.

"There is such a condition of things between enemies as a truce," said her husband.

"Then it must be a life-long truce!" exclaimed Judith.

He took no notice of the interruption, but proceeded:

"I have decided instead of going to the city, I will remove to the old homestead up in Maine."

Judith shuddered.

"Maine in December! I feel frozen at the very notion. Why cannot we run over to Paris?"

"Because I prefer and choose to go to Maine."

Clifford went on:

"The law, which you are so fond of quoting, while it compels me to give you your legal rights as a wife, leaves me still the liberty of choosing my place of residence. As the head of my family, I choose to fix my future abode in Maine."

Judith turned rather pale, but in quiet and composed tones said:

"You do not propose to make it your permanent home, surely?"

"That is my intention," coldly replied Clifford.

Judith smiled a somewhat sickly smile as she replied:

"At all events, you will have to bear your share of the dullness and tedium of such a Robinson Crusoe life. That is one comfort. But I shall have some company, I suppose—some society?"

"Certainly. You will have my society! You compared us only yesterday to Darby and Joan. They were content and satisfied to be all in all to each other. We can do likewise."

Judith flashed indignant glances from her coal-black eyes. Then conjuring up a laugh:

"Ah, well, after knocking about two hemispheres for nearly ten years, I can appreciate a few months of quiet, and enjoy them. At all events, I have lived to become a millionaire's wife. We will see who wears first of our Maine home!"

"Rely upon it, it will not be I," said her husband.

"When do we go?" suddenly inquired Judith.

"To-morrow!" sententiously replied he.

"You will be good enough, therefore, to prepare accordingly. The train leaves at six in the morning."

"And when may we expect to arrive at this outlandish place?" inquired Judith.

"About seven in the evening."

Judith again visibly shuddered.

"If you have not all you wish, it is your own fault," said Mr. Clifford. "I have given Mrs. Jenkins directions to comply with all your wants."

Judith rose from her seat and moved toward the door.

Turning round with her fingers on the handle, she extended her clinched fist in the direction of her husband, and with the tone and expression of a pythoness, exclaimed:

"If you think, Mr. Clifford, by a cold-blooded plan of solitary confinement and banishment from all the pleasures and dignities of my station, to drive me from your home again, you are egregiously mistaken. Though you live to the age of ninety, I will be your constant companion. No murmur shall escape my lips; no bribe that you can offer me, not the half of your fortune, shall ever tempt me to agree to a separate maintenance. My place as Mrs. Henry Clifford is by the side of my husband, wherever he may choose to reside."

He bowed.

"I am glad to find, madam, that you are so well acquainted with the duties of a wife."

Not another word passed between the ill-assorted couple, and Mr. Clifford was left to his meditations.

Of the bitter character of those meditations we dare not trust ourselves to speak.

The rest of the day he spent in writing letters. One was to his friend and companion, Dolly Wickham.

He knew he should meet with sincere sympathy in that quarter. Another letter was to Caroline.

It could only be described as a despairing farewell, concluding with fervent prayers for her happiness and eternal welfare.

Punctual to the minute on the morning following, two carriages were at the door of Maplewood, and Mr. and Mrs. Clifford took their places in the first, while the second contained the maid and valet and baggage of the happy pair.

After a drive of a few minutes the railway station was reached, and they commenced the long, dreary journey of thirteen hours on a bitter December day.

Clifford found it impossible to avoid contrasting his present lot with what would have been the case had Fate allowed his marriage with Caroline Balfour to take place.

He would now have been staying in her sweet company at the "Hotel Brunswick," receiving and paying visits among the cream of the fashionable New York world. Now he was ensconced in the seat of a stuffy railway car, nominally occupied in reading the *Tribune*, but really a prey to bitter and despairing thoughts.

Opposite to him was the once-loved Judith—a bloated, deceptive woman of the world, with Heaven knows what antecedents, turning over listlessly the pages of a yellow-covered French novel.

During the long and weary journey not a dozen words were interchanged between the reunited couple.

At length the train stopped at a small station, and Judith was informed that her journey, so far as the railway was concerned, was at an end.

Again Mr. Clifford and his wife entered a close carriage; and after a toilsome drive of an hour along stony and ill-kept roads, they alighted at their destination.

It was too dark to see anything; but the heavy boom of the waves upon the rocky coast informed Judith that they were within sound of the sea.

A couple of servants met them in the hall, and Judith was escorted to her room by a maid, who informed her that dinner would be on the table in an hour.

Dismissing her as soon as possible, Judith sat down on a high backed oaken chair to think!

Would it be possible to endure the life she saw vividly before her in the future?

Cliff Farm was situated directly on the coast, and apparently miles away from other human habitation.

The dwelling itself, an old red brick farmhouse, gave Judith the shivers just to think of as a residence. Having been closed for several years it had a moldy disused smell, and a dismal, comfortless appearance, intensified by the stiff old-fashioned horse hair furniture and bare walls.

However, Judith had determined to make the best of it, and summoning all her courage she descended to the "best room," where she found her husband sitting in solitary state.

He rose; and giving her his arm at once conducted her to the dining-room.

Judith was pleased to find that he vouchsafed her a certain amount of ordinary discourse, but the character of the conversation was somewhat similar to that prevailing in a mourning-coach at a funeral.

After dinner Clifford read a book of solid character, leaving Judith to amuse herself in her own way.

Precisely as the clock struck ten he rose from his seat, and coldly bidding Judith good-night, left her to proceed to her gloomy chamber, with the rustling leaves and the noise of the breakers as they dashed themselves to pieces on the rocks below.

Thus ended the first day of Judith's stay at Mrs. Clifford at the old homestead.

CHAPTER V.

A PECULIAR BROTHER.

A DESCRIPTION of one day at Cliff Farm will suffice for all.

Mr. Clifford and Judith, of course, met each other at the hours appointed for the several meals of the day.

The morning was generally spent by Clifford in correspondence with his business manager and the afternoon in riding and driving about the neighborhood.

Sometimes Judith accompanied him, but after a time she grew weary of monotonous drives in the dreary neighborhood of Cliff Farm.

Several times she felt half-tempted to make a bargain with her husband, and accept a handsome allowance as a separate maintenance, and change her quarters to a more congenial locality. But the conviction which she entertained that Mr. Clifford was compelling her to lead her present solitary life in order that this might be the result, sustained her in her determination to endure her gloomy existence at any cost. The time must come when he himself would give way from sheer exhaustion.

But weeks rolled on, and Judith could detect no signs of weariness, on the part of her husband. He never smiled, and spoke but rarely. Life seemed to be over for him, with its hopes and fears, and he appeared reconciled to pass the remainder of his existence in a manner which could only be characterized as a living death.

He never made any inquiries as to her career during the last ten years, and did not appear to entertain the least curiosity on the subject. Judith tried long walks by the ocean, and admired sincerely the grandeur of the bold, rocky coast, but this pleasure soon came to an end.

There was a good library at the Farm, and Judith had ever been fond of reading. But she found it very dull reading books, with no one to talk to about them when finished.

One morning at breakfast, Judith said, in somewhat querulous tones, "Do you really mean to say there are no living beings within reach of us with whom we could associate?"

"There is only one place—Penwyn House—and that is unoccupied," replied Mr. Clifford.

"If you mean the large white house about four miles from hence, a new occupant has lately taken possession of the place—at least, so my maid tells me. I shall call and leave our cards."

Clifford felt strongly tempted to prohibit anything of the kind, but after a moment's

flection, acceded to her request. Some faint sentiment of pity for the lonely life of the woman who, when all was said and done, was still his legal wife, prompted him to relax in some degree the harsh rule he had hitherto laid down. Perhaps, also, he himself was not averse to seeing some other face at his solitary table. So it was settled that Mrs. Clifford should drive over to Penwyn House that afternoon and leave cards.

When Clifford and his wife met at dinner in the evening, Judith was full of the charms and accomplishments of Mrs. Hughes, the widow of a rich Boston iron merchant.

"She is about thirty, and has one child, a daughter about twelve years of age—a perfect reproduction in miniature of her handsome mother. They will return the call to-morrow. Will you arrange to be at home in the afternoon?"

Clifford reluctantly assented.

Accordingly, when Mrs. Hughes and daughter entered the parlor at Cliff Farm the following day, they were received by Mr. and Mrs. Clifford.

Judith had not flattered the widow of the rich iron merchant. She was undeniably a very pretty woman, slightly below the middle height, with a tendency to *embonpoint*; she had rosy cheeks and merry, laughing blue eyes.

Clifford received her with his accustomed easy grace and good breeding, and he evidently made a very good impression on Mrs. Hughes, who naturally felt much flattered at making the acquaintance of a neighbor with fifty thousand a year.

Her daughter had been well described as a miniature reflection of her mother, except that she possessed a pair of keen black eyes, which saw everything, and seemed to have the power of penetrating a mill-board.

"Do you intend making a long stay, Mr. Clifford?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hughes; I intend making this my future home. Mrs. Clifford is fond of solitude, and, like myself, is weary of a town life."

"I am sorry to contradict my husband, but I can assure you, Mrs. Hughes, he is joking," interrupted Judith, in somewhat indignant tones. "Any one would suppose that we were economizing, and putting by for a rainy day."

"A very necessary course of procedure in these days of bank failures," said her husband, dryly.

"I am sure you have not perceived any indications of the kind," said Judith.

"Mrs. Clifford," exclaimed he, in emphatic tones, "I presume you have not invited Mrs. Hughes to listen to an argument in which it is impossible she can take the slightest interest!"

Mrs. Hughes almost repented that she had accepted the invitation to call at Cliff Farm.

But Mr. Clifford now intervened with a question as to the age of Miss Hughes. Any interest shown with respect to this young lady was always peculiarly acceptable to the bereaved widow.

"Euphemia is just twelve. Phemie, dear, perhaps Mr. Clifford would like to hear you play the 'Maiden's Prayer.'"

He offered no objection, having a dim idea that the piece was a lengthy one, and therefore would occupy a certain space of time.

Miss Hughes certainly played very well, and received her due meed of praise. At length the formal visit came to an end, adieux were exchanged, and the Hugheses departed on their return to Penwyn House.

It was fortunate that Judith did not hear the exhaustive analysis of Miss Euphemia as to the mental characteristics of Mrs. Clifford, her clear perception of the unhappy relations existing between Judith and her husband, and her prophecies as to the results in the distant future. Miss Euphemia had been spoiled, as every only child is spoiled, and her mother took a weak pride in the caustic observations of her precocious daughter.

During the following month the intimacy with the Hugheses increased, probably owing

to the fact that Judith made a virtue of necessity, and cultivated the only female society within reach.

Mrs. Hughes invariably remained the night at the farm whenever she dined there, and sometimes the visit was extended two or three days, her daughter Euphemia of course accompanying her.

But now a new and important visitor was about to form one of the limited domestic circle at the Maine home of the Cliffords.

One morning at breakfast, Judith was occupied in reading a long letter, which bore the postmark of Boston on the envelope.

"This is from my brother Paul. I suppose you have no objection to his paying me a farewell visit before he starts for Mexico?"

Clifford frowned, and his countenance grew dark.

"The man who decoyed you from my side within a few weeks of our marriage?"

"Yes, Harry; but he was an irresponsible agent, I can assure you."

"You promised to tell me the whole story of that mysterious disappearance."

"So I will, immediately after his departure, Harry."

Clifford remained in deep thought for several seconds.

"When do you propose your brother should pay this farewell visit?"

"He writes from Boston, and will be here this evening, unless he receives a telegram to the contrary."

After some further discussion, Mr. Clifford gave a somewhat cold and reluctant assent to the visit of Mr. Paul Swaine.

Judith was agreeably surprised that he consented thereto; but if the truth must be told, he was suffering severely from the enforced penance of seclusion he had prescribed as his rule in life; so much so, that he had only yesterday written a line to Mr. Wickham, suggesting that he should pay him a lengthened visit if he could make it convenient.

Mr. Clifford was unable to divest himself of some amount of curiosity as to the personal characteristics of his strange visitor.

Mr. Paul Swaine was timed to arrive at six o'clock, and punctual to the minute, a carriage drove up to the hall door containing two individuals.

One of them descended and was met at the door by Judith, who, kissing him on both cheeks, welcomed him to Cliff Farm.

Mr. Swaine tossed the driver a coin and allowed himself to be shown to his private room.

In less than an hour Mr. Swaine descended to the drawing-room, where he found his sister and Mr. Clifford.

"My brother Paul!" exclaimed Judith, with a nervous glance at her husband.

"Hope I see you well, Mr. Clifford," said Mr. Swaine, holding out a large, red hand.

Clifford took no notice of the extended fingers, but slightly bowed his head in acknowledgment of the greeting of his brother-in-law. But there was one thing he could not help doing; he could not refrain from taking an exhaustive survey of the new arrival.

He was a man of middle height, lithe and sinewy in figure, with a type of countenance which might have befitted a miner or Western farmer who had spent the greater portion of his life in roughing it. His countenance was tanned by exposure, and he possessed an eye of remarkable keenness and brilliancy. He was, of course, dressed in the conventional frock-coat, but it did not seem to sit naturally upon him, and you could more easily picture him in the loose costume of a Californian gold-digger.

He spoke with a slight accent and twang.

"I take it very kindly that you should allow me to pay a visit to my sister before I return to my old diggings. I am quite aware that the aristocracy are what you may term rather exclusive in their notions, and therefore it is the more civil on your part."

"I could hardly refuse Mrs. Clifford the

pleasure of a brief visit from her only brother on the eve of a long separation."

"Just so. You seem to have a queer old place up here. But I should say it was plaguey dull—that is, after a short time."

"Use is second nature, Mr. Swaine," replied his host. "You can form no idea of the pleasure we derive from the associations of our youth—we whose surroundings change so utterly."

Mr. Swaine here pulled out a large gold repeater, and in a whisper, asked his sister if the hour of feeding-time had arrived.

Mr. Clifford guessed the purport of the inquiry, for he observed:

"I am sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Swaine; but the fact is, I expect another visitor."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Judith, in unfeigned surprise. "You never told me, Harry!"

"I did not deem it necessary," he replied coldly, as he rung the bell, and inquired of the servant if Mr. Wickham had arrived.

"Yes, sir—about half an hour ago."

Judith smiled approvingly.

She had heard enough of this friend of her husband to know that he was an agreeable companion, and one likely to assimilate with her somewhat eccentric habits.

Ere another word was spoken, Mr. Wickham entered the room.

Shaking hands heartily with Mr. Clifford, he expressed a hope that he had not kept dinner waiting.

"Not in the least, Wickham," replied Clifford. "Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Clifford; also to Mr. Paul Swaine, her brother."

Mr. Wickham bowed, and endeavored, but in vain, to conceal his astonishment at the singular appearance of Mr. Swaine.

Then, turning to his friend:

"I had made all my arrangements for a visit to Cliff Farm, feeling sure you would not object to my taking French leave, when your kind invitation arrived."

Dinner was now announced, and Wickham, giving his arm to Mrs. Clifford, led the way to the dining room, followed by Mr. Clifford and Mr. Paul Swaine.

It did not escape the keen eye of Dolly Wickham that whenever Mr. Swaine seemed inclined to become loquacious he was checked by a mysterious glance of his sister.

But Mr. Wickham chatted away, carefully selecting such topics as he considered would best be appreciated by the singular trio with whom he found himself for the time associated.

As soon as dessert was placed upon the table, Mrs. Clifford arose to depart, observing, in a very marked manner, to her brother:

"Paul, you will not keep my husband and Mr. Wickham from the drawing-room longer than you can help."

"No fear, Judith," replied Paul.

"Stay; excuse me a moment, Mr. Clifford."

Mr. Swaine rose from the table, and following Judith to the door, whispered to her for a few moments.

During their brief colloquy, Mr. Wickham rapidly penciled a few words on the back of a card and passed it to Clifford, who, glancing at it, placed it in his vest pocket.

Paul returned to his seat.

"It is easy to see with half an eye, Mr. Wickham, that you belong to the quality. You are, as I may say, behind the scenes of society. You know how the strings are pulled, and who pulls them. Now, the general public take all their ideas from the newspapers, who know rather less than the gullible public do. I have enjoyed your talk very much. I will help myself, Clifford, if you have no objection."

So saying, Mr. Swaine poured out a bumper of claret, which speedily disappeared.

Presently Wickham turned to his host.

"It seems very ungracious, Harry, with these choice vintages before us, but I should like some of your celebrated Scotch whisky, if you have any at Cliff Farm."

"Certainly, by all means," replied the other, ringing the bell as he spoke.

"I beg to second the motion of the gentleman," cried Paul. "Claret is all very well—and this is prime—but I feel like the countryman who complained that no matter how much he drank, he didn't get any farrarder."

The servant now appeared with the whisky, and Paul proceeded to brew himself a sling, which, from its strength, caused no small astonishment in the company.

Wickham followed his example in a minor degree.

In a brief space of time the spirit had disappeared, and Wickham, pushing the decanter toward Paul, a second tumbler was concocted, which speedily followed the other.

The effect was soon apparent. The tongue of Paul was loosened, and the conversation of the three gentleman became a monologue, in which Paul was the sole performer.

He poured forth a string of anecdotes of hairbreadth escapes in the uncivilized regions of the Far West—among Indians, Californian gold-diggers, and rowdies of Denver City.

Clifford listened with moody brow and downcast eye, as he reflected on the relationship existing between them—his only consolation being that the present visit of Mr. Paul Swaine was a farewell visit, and no one could tell but that some fortunate bullet might happily remove Mr. Paul Swaine to another and a better world during the course of his next sojourn in the Western States.

Wickham listened with undisguised enjoyment to the fearful tales so graphically told by the successful go'd-digger. Among them was an account of the lynching of an assassin in Denver City, in the early days of that now much-improved place.

Victor Hugo might have taken a lesson in scenic effect had he listened to the story.

You saw the excited mass of desperadoes, in their red shirts, unshaven faces, and matted locks, lighted up by the fitful glare of a limited number of pine-torches. In the center was the assassin, deathly pale, with the conviction of speedy death in his glazed and shrinking eyes. Of gigantic stature and herculean strength, of what avail were these qualities opposed to the scores of excited men around him?

A self-constituted judge was listening to the brief facts advanced in evidence by eye-witnesses of the deed. A unanimous verdict of "Guilty" was raised from a hundred throats. A rope was quickly fastened round the throat of the unhappy wretch and in a second, amid the joyful and frantic shouts of the motley crew, he was seen dangling in mid-air in the last agonies of death.

Clifford could not help a shudder as he mentally realized the scene portrayed with so much graphic force.

Even Wickham drained the glass of whisky in front of him.

Paul leaned across the table as he hoarsely whispered, "Since that night I have always had a companion with me night and day, one whom I can trust. See, here it is."

As he spoke, Paul produced a six-chambered revolver from his pocket.

"Loaded in every chamber, I assure you. What else would be the use of it, eh? Now I feel safe against man, the devil himself, and all his works; and as for a mark, I could put a bullet through any specified button of your waistcoat, Wickham, at a hundred paces."

Wickham half-repenting his pencil memorandum to his friend; but only for a moment.

"I have no doubt, Mr. Swaine; but suppose you restore your trusty companion, as you call it, to its former receptacle."

"My pocket? Oh, yes, by all means."

Wickham continued, "You are not doing your duty to Mr. Clifford's excellent whisky, Mr. Swaine. I do not suppose you ever met with such in your wanderings?"

"Oh, this whisky is well enough! I like it because you can drink such a lot of it. Now, out in Frisco the whisky is like fire or molten

oil. At this moment I am as sober as a judge. If I had drank the same quantity in California I should have been what you call drunk. Now, no man would dare to say I am drunk now."

Wickham expressed his profound belief in the sobriety of Mr. Swaine in the past, present, and future.

"I suppose you were so much engaged in amassing a fortune, Mr. Swaine, that you were not able to spare time for the pleasures of love—I mean, you were never married?"

"Not married! But I was, to the most splendid girl you ever saw!"

"How long ago, Mr. Swaine?"

Paul began to calculate; but his mental arithmetic came to an unexpected conclusion.

Mrs. Clifford suddenly entered the room.

Advancing, with flashing eye and pale marble features, Judith clasped her brother by the arm.

"Paul, is this your promise?"

The words were hissed rather than spoken, and appeared to have a remarkable sobering effect upon the person to whom they were addressed.

He turned pale, and stammered forth some incoherent syllables.

"Will you excuse my brother retiring early to rest this evening? He is fatigued with his long journey. Come, Paul, you know you are not strong."

Paul suffered himself to be led away by his sister till he reached the door of the dining-room, then he suddenly and swiftly walked back to the dining-table, and in much more composed tones than he had been using the last half-hour, whispered, confidentially, "The splendid girl I was going to tell you about died in the flower of her youth. I will tell you all about it another time."

As soon as the brother and sister had left the room, Clifford exclaimed, "What on earth, Wickham, could be your motive in fuddling this coarse specimen of humanity? I must say I prefer Paul Swaine sober to Paul Swaine drunk."

"I would rather reserve my answer, Harry, for a time. I penciled those few words on my card, asking you to allow me the privilege of a host, and urge Mr. Paul Swaine to sacrifice to Bacchus. You know the old saying—'A drunken man generally speaks the truth.'"

"But what can you possibly want to know about the antecedents of such a man?"

"Time will show," replied Wickham, in sententious tones.

Wickham mentally returned thanks that his visit to Cliff Farm had been timed so *apropos* of the object he had in view, and which object he felt more convinced than ever he should succeed in accomplishing.

CHAPTER VI.

SUSPICIONS.

MR. PAUL SWAINE did not appear at the breakfast-table the following morning, his sister making the excuse of fatigue after a long journey as the reason for his non-appearance. Observing an involuntary smile pass across the good-humored face of Wickham, Judith colored up as she added, "My brother Paul is not strong, though you would hardly believe it. The very fact of his having undertaken so many and such arduous journeys has tended to weaken his otherwise strong constitution."

"I can readily believe it, Mrs. Clifford," replied Wickham. "And then he has never experienced the recuperative effects of a home and an affectionate wife to nurse him, and refit him for the struggles of the world again."

This was a chance shot of Wickham, as he entertained doubts as to the marriage of Paul Swaine, although why, he could scarcely have explained if he had been asked.

"No; my poor brother never married."

Wickham and Clifford exchanged glances of surprise.

"I have often begged him to take a wife and settle down, but he has always expressed an invincible repugnance to matrimony."

As soon as the breakfast was concluded, Judith proceeded to the room of her brother in order to see that his wants had been attended to by the servants.

Wickham shrugged his shoulders as the door closed upon her retreating figure.

"Harry?"

"Well, Dolly?"

"Did you notice the counter-statement of Mrs. Clifford as to the matrimonial views of Mr. Paul Swaine?"

"Pshaw, Dolly! You would not place any importance in the words of a man under the influence of whisky?"

"As I said last evening, time will show," rejoined Wickham.

Paul here made his appearance, looking somewhat sheepish.

Clifford cut short his apologies.

"No excuses, Mr. Swaine; we are all liable to sudden indisposition. I am glad to hear you are better this morning."

It was impossible to imagine a greater contrast between Paul drunk and Paul sober; especially after a bout wherein he was painfully conscious he had been very loquacious and confidential.

He would have given a heavy sum in dollars if he could only have remembered what he had given utterance to under the influence of that soft but insidious Scotch whisky on the preceding evening.

But it was impossible to discover anything from the manner and conversation of his host and his friend Wickham. In fact, they were twice as cordial as heretofore.

After a few brief remarks, Paul declared his intention of taking a solitary stroll along the rocky coast.

He preferred, he said, to go alone, as the headache from which he was still suffering would render him but a dull companion.

It is needless to say that neither of the gentlemen preferred any very strong desire to accompany him in his perambulations.

"Well, Dolly, what do you think of the present Mrs. Clifford?"

Wickham hesitated.

"She certainly shows traces of having been a great beauty in her day."

Clifford sighed.

"I can hardly expect you to speak your thoughts respecting the wife of your friend. Let me tell you the whole story."

He then proceeded to relate the history of his connection with Judith Swaine, as known to the reader.

At the conclusion, Wickham pressed the hand of his friend.

"I am glad you have told me all. How long does this man remain at Cliff Farm?"

"I cannot tell. He is supposed to be here merely on a farewell visit to his sister prior to his departure for Mexico."

Wickham remained in deep thought for several minutes.

"Harry, I will, with your permission, make a somewhat lengthened stay. At all events, till this man takes his departure."

"My dear Dolly, stay as long as you like. What is your general impression of things?"

"I would rather reserve my opinion for a time. Now, tell me, Harry, did you seriously contemplate removing yourself from all intercourse with your fellow creatures in this very fine, very old-fashioned, but—pardon me for saying so—very dull habitation?"

"I did, and do still to a certain extent," replied Clifford. "Judith professes to believe it is simply a trial of patience as to who shall tire first of this place. But she is in error. I am weary of life, and all that it contains. To parade Judith as my wife in New York society is simply out of the question."

"You must pardon me for speaking plainly," said Wickham; "but you have no moral or legal right to condemn your wife to social ostracism; to immure her in a luxurious prison, deprived of all society!"

"Perhaps not," replied the other; "but you must make allowances for the bitter exaspera-

tion I felt toward the woman who had twice wrecked my life and happiness; once, when she fled so wantonly, and as it still appears to me, so unmercifully, from me during our honeymoon; and again, when she returned just as my life was opening out into new prospects of joy and felicity. But I had already begun to relax the severity of the course I had laid down as to society. We have a very pleasant neighbor, a Mrs. Hughes, a rich widow, young and pretty; with only one drawback—a peculiarly unpleasant child, a girl about twelve years old. I feel when in her presence as if the child had power to read my inmost thoughts. But we can hardly invite the mother without the child, and leave her to the solitude of Penwyn House. I should not be at all surprised if the pretty widow made her appearance here to-day. That will show you the terms of friendship already existing between the two families."

As the event proved, Clifford was correct in his anticipation—Mrs. Hughes and her daughter turned up in the afternoon.

They were duly introduced to Mr. Wickham, who was instantly charmed with the handsome widow and amused with the daughter.

"Upon my word," said Wickham, when he was alone with Clifford, "you have a curious collection here at Cliff Farm; an ironmaster's widow, an inquisitive daughter, a rowdy customer from Denver City, and—"

Wickham paused and blushed.

"Finish the catalogue, Dolly; or shall I finish it for you?—A mysterious wife who has turned up from Heaven knows where, after ten years of unaccountable absence, which she involuntarily underwent, Heaven knows why!"

Wickham bowed assent.

Mrs. Hughes betrayed even more surprise than Wickham on being introduced to the aristocratic brother of Mrs. Clifford.

During dinner she conversed almost exclusively with Mr. Wickham; while Clifford amused himself with the remarks of Miss Hughes. Paul was very silent during the meal, merely uttering an occasional observation to his sister.

He was abstemious as to wine, and retired early under the plea of indisposition.

After dinner, Mrs. Hughes played and sung in a very accomplished manner, with Wickham in close attendance at the piano; while Mr. and Mrs. Clifford constituted the audience, Miss Euphemia having long since sought her pillow.

After breakfast on the following morning, Wickham went for a stroll along the sea-shore.

Clifford was occupied with his business correspondence, and the gentleman from Denver City was not visible.

It was a bright spring morning, and a brisk southwesterly wind caused the rollers from the Atlantic to dash in picturesque billows on the rocky shore.

Wickham had walked about a mile when he came suddenly upon Mrs. Hughes and her daughter. The widow was looking her best this morning. The breeze had deepened the carnation of her cheeks, and her bright blue eyes sparkled with health and vivacity. Mrs. Hughes had also considerable taste in dress, and her present costume was admirably adapted to show off her charms of face and figure.

The iron merchant had been dead nearly two years, but his widow still wore a slight species of half-mourning.

Was it because there is no style of dress so becoming, or because the heart of Mrs. Hughes still ached for her untimely loss? Who can tell? We do not intend to solve such an inscrutable mystery.

The usual salutations took place, and then by degrees the conversation drifted to the subject of the singular brother of Mrs. Clifford.

"I don't believe he is her brother," exclaimed Euphemia.

"Hush, child! You must not speak in that way before a friend of hers!" exclaimed the alarmed mother. "I am afraid I have sadly spoiled her, Mr. Wickham. She is my only one, and all that is left to remind me of my departed Edward."

"Pray don't apologize, Mrs. Hughes. I never saw Mrs. Clifford till yesterday, so I can hardly be called a friend of hers. Will you allow me, my dear Mrs. Hughes, to ask the young lady a few questions?"

"Certainly."

"Now, tell me, Miss Euphemia, why you don't believe Mr. Swaine to be a brother of Mrs. Clifford?"

"Because there is not the smallest resemblance between them," replied Euphemia.

Wickham shook his head.

"If that is all you have to go upon, you have a very slender basis for your doubts. I have frequently seen brothers and sisters unlike each other."

The child laughed.

"Ah, but not so unlike as Mr. Swaine and Mrs. Clifford."

The remark made a greater impression upon him than Wickham cared to own.

"And they don't behave to each other like brother and sister," continued Euphemia.

"How do you mean?"

"I can't exactly explain. But you watch them when they are together. They look spiteful at each other, as if they were man and wife."

"Euphemia, my love?" exclaimed the widow in horror-stricken accents. "What will Mr. Wickham think of the life I led your poor father? I can assure you—"

"Pray don't explain, my dear Mrs. Hughes. I am certain Diogenes himself would have been all sweetness and compliment in your charming society."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Mr. Wickham. We are now approaching a singular cave. The people about here say that whatever is uttered at the mouth is heard far in the interior. I cannot explain it; but Euphemia knows all about it."

"Yes; I will be the showman," said the child—"or cicerone, I should say."

Euphemia ran onward, full of impatience to display her exhibiting powers, and presently stopped at a circular opening in the rocky cliff, about ten feet in height.

"There is another entrance round the corner of the cliff. Please take Mr. Wickham there, mamma, and I will stay at the mouth facing the sea."

Mrs. Hughes and Wickham accordingly proceeded to a similar opening, and, having entered the cave, paused to listen.

In a few moments, having placed their ears close to the wall of the cavern, the following words fell upon the drum of the ear with startling distinctness:

"Mr. Paul Swaine is not the brother of Mrs. Clifford, as you will find out some day!"

Wickham could scarcely believe that Miss Hughes had softly breathed those words in the faintest possible whisper at the mouth of the cave facing the sea.

He was half-inclined to believe that Euphemia was playing some practical joke upon him.

So the child insisted on Mr. Wickham making the experiment, and whispering a sentence in his turn.

Euphemia and her mother presently came to Mr. Wickham, who said, "Well, what did I say?"

But Euphemia laughed and blushed, and declined to answer.

"As I thought," said Wickham. "You were hoaxing me; you spoke in a loud voice."

Mrs. Hughes laughed, and said, "Euphemia, I must tell Mr. Wickham. The words were, 'If Miss Euphemia is so clever and pretty at twelve, what will she be at twenty?'"

"Are you convinced, Mr. Wickham?" said Euphemia, in a triumphant tone.

"Quite. It is almost as wonderful as the

Whispering Gallery in St. Paul's Cathedral abroad."

"I call the cave the Ear of Dionysius," said Euphemia.

"Why so?"

"What, Mr. Wickham! have you never heard of the Tyrant of Syracuse?" exclaimed the child.

"I am afraid not, Miss Hughes. My education has been somewhat neglected. Tell me about it."

"Dionysius had a cave made like the hune ear, in which he used to sit, and so hear conversation of the political prisoners."

"Thanks for your historical lecture, Miss Euphemia. But I think we had better think of returning to the Farm; there are some ominous clouds coming up from the southwest."

Wickham's words proved true, for, in spite of the speed they made, the big, heavy drops of rain had become a pattering shower ere they reached the homestead.

Euphemia had run forward with the agility of a chamois over the rocks and boulders of the sea-shore, and was found by Wickham and his fair companion watching eagerly for them at the entrance-gate.

The widow did not begrudge the time and labor, or the mild drenching undergone, as the rapid and difficult journey necessitated the continual help of Mr. Wickham, who partly lifted and partly carried her over the impedimenta.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HIDDEN WITNESS.

At the earnest request of Mrs. Clifford, Mrs. Hughes consented to prolong her visit, and a servant was accordingly dispatched to Penwyn House for further supplies of raiment.

Judith considered it prudent to act in this manner, as her brother was thus left more to himself, which would not have been the case if Mr. Wickham had had no one to occupy his time and attention.

As it was, that time and attention seemed to be fully taken up in the companionship of the pretty widow; so much so, that Clifford rallied his friend thereon.

"Dolly, Dolly, I am afraid you are smitten in earnest—or, as our polished visitor from Denver would say, are a 'gone coon.'"

"You mean that I am in love with Mrs. Hughes?"

"I do."

Wickham shook his head.

"No, Harry. Mrs. Hughes is a very charming person—very pretty, and tolerably rich, I dare say, but hardly the wife for Dolly Wickham."

"Stay a minute, Dolly. Not so fast. Are you aware that Mrs. Hughes, before she married the wealthy and vulgar Hughes, was a Miss Mostyn? The Mostyns are one of the best families in Boston, and profess to be directly descended from the Mayflower Puritans. And I do not consider that the fact of her income being some ten thousand a year constitutes any objection in a matrimonial point of view"—another settler.

Wickham withdrew his objection, but observed, with a sigh:

"I shall never marry. You will excuse me speaking more plainly, Harry."

Well did Clifford know to whom his friend alluded in those sorrowful words.

Judith and her brother frequently took long walks on the sea-shore, generally in the afternoon after luncheon. Sometimes Wickham encountered them in the course of their rambles on the rocky beach, but Judith and her brother never encouraged their society, and as the other guests were equally indifferent on the point, a few words were all that passed, and each party proceeded on its own way.

One afternoon Judith and Paul had sallied out as usual, and Wickham having waited till it was known in which direction they proposed walking, in order that he and the widow

might walk in the opposite direction, Euphemia was told to put on her hat and accompany her mother. But Euphemia begged hard to be excused, pleading slight headache, and an anxious desire to read a new book which had been presented to her by Mr. Wickham.

At first, Mrs. Hughes expressed her intention of abandoning her walk, and sitting with her ailing child. But Euphemia declared that perfect quiet would alone restore her to her ordinary condition of health, and drive away her headache.

"Surely, mamma, you are not afraid to trust yourself alone with Mr. Wickham."

The pretty widow blushed over face and neck.

"Hush, child! What nonsense you do talk!"

The remark of Euphemia decided Mrs. Hughes, especially as Mr. Wickham had been present when it was made by the precocious child. So in a few minutes Mrs. Hughes and Wickham set forth on their ramble.

We must now follow Judith and Paul on their walk along the sea-shore.

The countenances of both wore an expression the reverse of amiable, and few were the words which passed between brother and sister.

So preoccupied were they that they did not observe the gathering of a bank of dark clouds which happens so frequently and suddenly on the stormy coast.

But the falling rain soon enlightened them on this point.

"See, here is shelter!" exclaimed Paul, as he pointed to the cave which had so astonished Wickham a few days previously with its wonderful whispering powers.

They hurried forward, and seated themselves on some large boulders at the entrance of the cave.

Here they were perfectly sheltered from the rain, and able to view at the same time the spectacle of the storm-tossed ocean as it foamed, and boiled, and thundered on the rocky beach.

It was a grand sight; but neither Paul nor his sister was in a humor to appreciate the picturesque.

For a time strict silence was preserved. At length Paul spoke in low earnest tones.

"Well, Judith, have you thought over my proposal?"

"I have," came from the pale compressed lips of his sister.

"And you have decided not to adopt it?"

"I have."

The keen eyes of the gold-digger gleamed savagely for a moment, but he kept down the angry retort, though with difficulty.

"I am quite certain Clifford would make you a handsome allowance to the tune of several thousands a year if you agree to a separate maintenance. Then, Judith, we could go where we pleased and live as we liked. You would not lose by so doing. If I were in your shoes, there is no sacrifice I would not make to get clear of this infernal hole. I can't think how you have stood it so long. Confound it, Judith, sometimes I think you have a warm side for this stuck-up snob!"

"Mr. Clifford is a gentleman, which is more than you are!" exclaimed Judith, her cheek no longer pale, but crimson with anger and excitement.

"Have a care, Judith; or I'll blow the whole gaff!"

"Bah!" replied his sister. "You are much too keen as to your own interest to do anything of the kind."

"Look here, Judith, Clifford looks upon me as a rich man. Even you do not know how poor I am. At this moment I have not fifty dollars in the world."

Judith made no attempt to conceal her astonishment.

"What has become of all your money?"

"Gambled away at billiards and horse-races."

Judith shrugged her shoulders in reply.

"Can you get me some cash?" inquired Paul.

"Impossible! Harry pays all the bills himself. I have merely a nominal allowance for clothes and petty expenses."

"What do you call a nominal allowance?"

"Three hundred a year. I will give you half of that sum, if that is any use to you."

Paul laughed aloud.

"Less than three dollars a week. Why, I have often staked double the sum you name on the turn up of a card."

"I cannot give you what I have not got," said Judith.

"You speak like a book. Now, look here, Judith! I am a desperate man, and cannot afford to spend valuable hours in shilly-shallying. I command you to submit proposals for a separate maintenance to the man who calls himself your husband!"

"Command?" exclaimed Judith, her cheek pale as that of a corpse.

"Yes, I command you! *I who am your legal husband, insist on your obeying me!*"

"What if I refuse?"

"Then I shall leave Cliff Farm, and forward to Mr. Clifford the copy of our marriage-certificate, dated twelve years ago."

Judith covered her face with her hands, and sobbed bitterly.

Stern as Rhadamanthus, Paul exclaimed:

"Your answer!"

"I consent. You will give me till tomorrow!"

"Ay; there is not that post-haste hurry. Come, let us be marching. The storm has cleared away."

Slowly and silently the husband and wife walked away in the direction of the Farm.

Scarcely had they left the mouth of the cave when a young girl emerged from the interior. It was Euphemia!

CHAPTER VIII.

UNMASKED.

ON the return of Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Wickham from their afternoon ramble, they were somewhat surprised to find the invalid Euphemia was out, and none of the servants knew what had become of her.

But after a few minutes' reflection they came to the conclusion that Miss Hughes had tried the experiment of a short stroll in the hope that the fresh air would dissipate her tiresome headache.

Mrs. Hughes was seated alone in the drawing-room, musing over the very attentive manner of Mr. Wickham during their walk on the beach that afternoon, when Euphemia suddenly entered the room.

She flew to her mother, and threw her arms round her neck. Her eyes were wild, and she was quite unable to speak, her breath coming thick and fast.

"My child, have you been running? Surely not?"

Euphemia nodded.

"How is your headache, darling?"

Euphemia turned from her mother in a petulant manner.

"Don't talk to me about headaches! I never had one."

"Never had one?"

"No; I was shamming. I wanted to be left alone. I wanted to follow Mrs. Clifford and that Mr. Paul Swaine."

"Good gracious, child! What for?"

"Listen. I followed them at a distance along the beach. It began to rain. They took shelter in my cave. I went in by the other entrance and heard all they said distinctly, though they spoke very low. What do you think, mamma? They are no more brother and sister than we are!"

"Euphemia, you have been dreaming!"

"No; I am wide awake. Now prepare yourself, mamma, for a great surprise. They are husband and wife!"

Mrs. Hughes clasped her hands in horror.

"I am astounded!"

"I am not, mamma; I am not in the least

surprised. I always told you they were married folks."

"What shall I do in the matter?" exclaimed puzzled Mrs. Hughes, who had never found herself in such a responsible position before.

"I know what I should do, mamma, if I were you. I should tell Mr. Wickham."

Mrs. Hughes reflected a minute.

"I believe you are right, child. Ring the bell, darling."

When the servant appeared, Mrs. Hughes requested him to ask Mr. Wickham if he would speak to her for a few minutes in the drawing-room.

Mr. Wickham presently appeared, and at once saw from the agitated manner of Mrs. Hughes that something important had occurred.

"You must pardon my sending for you in this cavalier manner, Mr. Wickham, but I have some dreadful news for you affecting our kind host, Mr. Clifford! Euphemia must remain, as she is my 'informant.'"

Wickham seated himself in front of Mrs. Hughes, and waited with some trepidation the announcement.

We need not repeat matter with which the reader is already acquainted. Suffice it to say that Euphemia detailed the important conversation to which she had been a listener in the cave that afternoon. Question and answer were given with dramatic contrast and force, so that both her mother and Wickham were perfectly able to realize the scene.

At the conclusion, Wickham remained perfectly silent, absorbed in thought.

"You must leave the matter in my hands, Mrs. Hughes."

"Oh, yes, certainly! But pray do not let us have any violence; Mr. Swaine gives me the idea of being such a desperate character."

"Have no fears, Mrs. Hughes. I will see this Paul Swaine. It will be better that I make what is called, in war, a *reconnaissance*, before telling poor Clifford. I see Paul coming across the lawn. Leave me before he enters the room."

It needed no urging to persuade Mrs. Hughes and her daughter to beat a hasty retreat.

Stepping through the French window, Paul Swaine entered the room.

"Good-afternoon, Wickham. Rather a showery day!"

"Yes; I think we shall have a storm." And (as Wickham mentally exclaimed, "A different storm to what you expect!"), "Mr. Swaine, I have to speak to you on a very important matter of business." A shifty, uneasy look gleamed from the gray eyes of Paul, but he made no reply. "You are sailing under false colors, Mr. Swaine!"

"What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I say. You are not the brother of Mrs. Clifford!"

Paul staggered to a seat, while his hand traveled mechanically to his breast-pocket.

"Who am I, then?"

"You are her husband, Mr. Swaine, married to her twelve years ago."

Large beads of perspiration rolled down the forehead of the gold-digger.

"Who told you this lie? Can you prove it?"

"I can."

Paul rose from his seat.

"Then do so. But even if it be so, this is no business of yours."

"I am the oldest friend Mr. Clifford has in the world, and I have thought it best to speak to you on the subject before speaking to him."

"Then Mr. Clifford knows nothing of this false report?"

"Not at present; but I expect him home shortly, and I shall make it my business to tell him."

"So be it. Till then I have nothing to say to any one on the subject."

Paul thereupon strode out of the room. He went straight to the boudoir of Mrs. Clifford.

Entering without his customary knock, he turned the key in the door, and threw himself full length on one of the splendid ottomans in the apartment.

Judith was seated in an arm-chair, endeavoring in vain to read a book which lay on the table before her. She perceived no escape from the ultimatum of Paul, and that to-morrow would see her a suppliant for an allowance, in order that she might live apart from the only man she had ever loved.

"Well, Judith, the game is up!"

Judith raised her large dark eyes from the book on which they were mechanically bent.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this; that Mr. Wickham knows we are man and wife."

"Impossible! Does Harry know?"

"Not yet. But he will before we are an hour older."

Judith covered her face with her hands, and remained in deep thought several moments. When those hands were removed, she looked five years older.

In hollow and feeble tones, she murmured:

"What do you propose, Paul?"

"My reply is obvious. Deny it hard and fast. Wickham does not even know your maiden name. How can he advertise for the certificate?"

"He might advertise for the certificate of two people whose name is now Swaine."

"True. Then it comes to this. Press the question of the separate allowance."

Judith shook her head.

"You forget that Harry would sacrifice half his fortune to break the legal tie which binds us. When I returned to him he was on the eve of marriage with another, one whom he loves still, for I have heard him utter her name when he has been dozing and dreaming in the arm-chair after dinner."

"Well, all we can do is to be guided by events," said Paul. "At present our course is clear. Emphatic and indignant denial of the atrocious charge."

Judith sat in a musing attitude.

"How can I meet him at dinner this evening?"

"Don't meet him; send him a message that you are so upset with the vile calumny of which you are the victim, etc., etc., that you cannot leave your room this evening. Hang it, Judith! where is your invention? You have been many a time in a worse fix than this!"

"And you! What will you do?"

"I—oh, I shall ride the high horse, and refuse to sit down with a man who believes me capable, etc., and all that sort of thing."

"But if he should ask to see you, Paul?"

"Well, then of course I must see him. Don't you fear, Judith; he will get nothing out of me."

So it was settled by this worthy couple, and Judith penned a note in accordance with the direction of her husband, excusing herself from appearing at the dinner-table that evening. But this note was retained for the chapter of events.

Then Paul unlocked the door and went to his own apartments.

An hour passed by, during which Judith sat like a statue, absorbed in the flow of thoughts and ideas which poured like a lava flood through her aching brain.

How had her secret been discovered? She and her brother had never uttered a syllable under the roof of Cliff Farm, which referred in the slightest degree to their intimate relationship, bearing in mind the old saying that "Walls have ears."

They had reserved any talk of that description for the wide expanse of sea, shore, and sky. Yesterday, certainly, they had spoken at the mouth of a cave on the sea-shore, but only in very low tones, so that if any one had been concealed therein, it was impossible they could have heard the compromising admission which had come from the lips of her husband.

Yet Mr. Wickham was aware of the identi-

cal year of her marriage with Paul Swaine! It was an inscrutable mystery.

Judith was still pursuing this bitter train of thought when her maid entered with a message from Mr. Clifford, requesting to see her in the drawing-room.

"Wait a minute, Parsons."

Quickly Judith penned the following lines, which she substituted for the note dictated by her brother:

"DEAR HARRY:—

"I am much too unwell to see you this evening. I have of course heard from Paul of the dreadful charge preferred against us both by Mr. Wickham. All shall be fully explained to-morrow morning. Till then farewell.

"Ever your loving

JUDITH."

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT HE COST HER.

Two hours had elapsed, and Judith still sat in a kind of waking trance when Paul entered the boudoir.

He held an open note in his hand.

"Well, Judith, I have got my notice to quit—my *conge*, as the French say. Read that."

With eyes swollen and blistered with tears, Judith read as follows:

"Mr. Clifford presents his compliments to Paul Swaine, and regrets that he is under the necessity of requesting his departure from Cliff Farm within an hour. With respect to his unfortunate wife, Judith Swaine, falsely calling herself Mrs. Clifford, Mr. Clifford will defer, at her own request, seeing her till to-morrow, when he will make arrangements for some provision for her during her lifetime, believing that she has been the tool of her husband."

"The servant who brought me the note informed me that a horse and carriage would be at the door in an hour."

"What will you do, Paul?" inquired his wife.

"Do! What can I do, but pack up and be off? No, Judith; I can fight to the death while I see a ghost of a chance; but Paul Swaine never runs his head against a brick wall. I shall drive to the nearest town, and wait for you—or, say, Trugo. It is only twenty miles. You will find me at the 'Bell Hotel.'"

Then Paul darted a keen, suspicious glance at his unhappy wife.

"You will be sure to come, Judith? You won't give me the slip, eh?"

"Yes, Paul; I will be sure to come, if alive and well!"

"Ah, then I shall see you. You know, Judith, you will now be an independent woman. We can go to New York and set up a gambling-table, and be as happy as the day is long. I wonder what Clifford will come down with? Be sure, Judith, you stand out for a good round sum!"

"I have full confidence in the generosity of Mr. Clifford," replied Judith, in a calm, resigned tone.

"Well, I must be off, although it won't take me many minutes to pack up my traps. Come, give us a kiss, old gal; we may be happy yet!" So saying, Paul Swaine made his exit.

Judith presently retired to her room, and lighting her lamp, opened her writing-case, and occupied an hour in writing some lines of farewell to the man she still loved to think was her husband.

Then Judith retired to rest.

No waking hours marked her last night at Cliff Farm. Immediately her fevered brain rested upon her down pillow, her eyelids closed, and the breathing was calm and placid as that of an infant.

The old clock chimed the wistful hours of night, and Judith lay still as a marble monument in some gray old cathedral.

The beams of the rising sun shed their soft spring rays into the chamber.

As the clock chimed eight the maid entered the room and drew up the blinds, then approached the bed of her mistress.

"Madam, it is eight o'clock."

No reply.

The maid touched the waxen hand of Judith,

which lay outside the coverlet. It was as cold as ice!

Horror-stricken, she raised the head of Judith from the pillow. It was as heavy as marble.

There was no room left for doubt. She was dead!

The maid uttered one piercing shriek, which echoed far and wide through the rooms, then sunk into a half-swoon on the floor.

There was the sound of hurrying footsteps on the stairs and in a few minutes a throng filled the chamber, among whom was the pale and terror-stricken master.

The cause of the death was soon apparent. An empty bottle marked "Hydrate of Chloral" lay on the dressing-table.

The verdict of the servants was that their unfortunate mistress had accidentally taken an overdose of chloral, which they knew she was in the habit of taking to procure peaceful and refreshing slumber.

This opinion was not shared either by Mr. Clifford or his friend, Wickham.

The sudden death was too contemporaneous with the late fearful discovery for them to entertain such a charitable supposition. But it is needless to say they kept the opinion secret, even from each other.

By the side of the empty bottle was a letter, addressed to Mr. Clifford in the handwriting of Judith Swaine.

As soon as Clifford could collect his thoughts he retired to his study, and breaking the seal of the letter, read as follows:

"Before quitting Cliff Farm, which I have learned from your letter to my husband I am ordered to do to-morrow, I wish to give some explanation of what must otherwise seem cold and calculating in my conduct toward yourself.

"You see I describe Paul Swaine as my 'husband.' Yes; I admit the truth of the charge. I was married to him twelve years ago at Denver.

"He deserted me six months after marriage and went to the gold-diggings in California.

"I received a letter from a friend of my husband, dated San Francisco, informing me that Paul Swaine had died of fever; so when I met you at Asbury I considered myself a widow.

"On this point I admit that I deceived you. I feared lest the relation of my unfortunate marriage with Paul Swaine would prejudice you against me.

"You can now understand my horror when I suddenly beheld, standing under the acacia trees in the Parc at Brussels, the husband I believed to be dead.

"In less than forty-eight hours I received a letter from Paul, asking me to meet him in the Gallery St. Hubert.

"You may probably remember how I stipulated that I should do my shopping alone.

"I met my husband, and he insisted that I should return with him to New York.

"He professed to be very indignant with the friend who had made such a careless mistake as to his reported death; but I have always believed in my own mind that he authorized his friend to send that false report for some reason best known to himself, probably to dissolve a union of which he was already weary; but, after a twelvemonth, changed his mind.

"We sailed in the Zealand, and, as you are aware, were wrecked soon after leaving port.

"We took to the boats.

"The boat we were in was picked up by an outward-bound vessel on her voyage to Nova Scotia, and the names of the occupants of our boat were not telegraphed to Belgium as being saved till many weeks afterward, long after you had, I suppose, abandoned all hopes of my being rescued.

"It boots not to record the life I led during the ten years I was absent from you.

"For several years we kept a gaming-house in Quebec. Sometimes we were rich, sometimes we were poor.

"I believe we should have thriven had my husband been content with what it seems a burlesque to call his *legitimate* earnings as proprietor of a gambler's hell.

"But the love of gambling was implanted so strongly in my husband's heart that he was unable to resist gratifying it.

"One night—how well I remember it!—Paul suggested to me that we should endeavor to trace the Henry Clifford who had married me at the mayor's office in New York.

"I spurned the thought, and was indignant at the bare idea. The object of Paul was that I should speak of him as my brother, and if Mr. Clifford turned out to be wealthy, I should return to him as his wife.

"By degrees the notion became less distasteful. I did so long to see you again—to hear your voice.

"One day in looking over a New York paper Paul saw in the Newport notes connected with the hunting-party the name of Henry Clifford, and immediately became possessed with the idea that it was the same man I had married so long before. What

brilliant visions he set before my eyes if I would only follow up the clew and act according to his wishes! To claim the name of Clifford as my right, and figure in the fashionable world of New York as the wife of the millionaire of that name! it was worth the venture, and I had to risk it at his bidding.

"We set sail for New York at once. We saw the rumors in the newspapers that Mr. Henry Clifford was engaged to be married.

"There was clearly no time to be lost. I attended at the Cornwall church, and all doubts were at once removed. I recognized in you my lover of Asbury, Henry Clifford!

"On the eve of your intended marriage I made my appearance at Maplewood. The rest you know.

"Paul was disappointed that I had not greater command of your income, and proposed coming to Cliff Farm as my brother to see for himself 'how the land lay'—to use his own words.

"I am aware I have committed a great sin. But I was afraid of my husband, and absolutely under his control.

"He threatened to have me prosecuted for bigamy unless I complied with his wishes.

"I have no more to say except to entreat your forgiveness. Something tells me that I am not long for this world. Farewell, dear Harry Clifford!

"Your broken-hearted, weary

JUDITH."

CHAPTER X.

THE END OF ALL.

PAUL SWAINE was in no humor for conversation with the servant who drove him from Cliff Farm to the railway station.

As a rule, Mr. Swaine rather prided himself on his powers of extracting information from his companions, whoever they might be, and when his coaxing powers failed, he generally fell back on the unfailing influence of a golden key, if the person to be operated upon was in a suitable station in life.

But so far as Mr. Clifford was concerned, Paul felt perfectly convinced all was over in that direction. So when the carriage drove up to the station, Paul took his valise from the servant, and with a grunt of thanks entered the waiting-room.

In due course he arrived at Trugo, and proceeded to the Bell Hotel, and after a brief supper retired to rest.

He rose late on the following day, and spent as much of his time as possible over a hearty breakfast. Then he strolled down the main street, looked in all the shops, and returned to the hotel.

He never remembered to have spent so long and dreary a day, and yet he had been condemned in times past to weeks of isolation in California.

But now he was counting the very hours till he should see Judith.

He longed to know the particulars of the provision for his wife which Mr. Clifford had promised to make on her behalf.

He read and re-read the lines in the note which notified him of the fact.

Of course the sum would be much smaller than the cost of maintenance of a Mrs. Clifford, had a separation been decided upon. But still the allowance would, no doubt, be a handsome one, bearing in mind the large means of the owner of Cliff Farm.

It was now six o'clock, and Paul was in the act of sitting down to as sumptuous a repast as the "Bell" could supply, when the landlord entered the room, with consternation written on his features.

"I think, sir, you said you had been staying at Cliff Farm?" Swaine nodded. "Well, sir, such a dreadful thing has happened; Mrs. Clifford was found dead in her bed this morning!"

"What?" exclaimed Paul, in a voice of thunder, rising from his seat.

The landlord related the particulars, and when he had finished Swaine gave vent to a string of execrations in an undertone, much to the astonishment of the landlord, who never saw grief for the departed illustrated in so level a manner.

"When is the next train from Trugo to Cliff Farm—at least, the station nearest to it?"

"In about a quarter of an hour, sir. Won't you have your dinner first sir?"

Paul made no reply, but seizing his hat, walked rapidly to the station.

The journey was only fifteen miles; so it was soon accomplished.

Although there were five extra miles before reaching the Farm, Paul decided to walk the distance, for the following reasons. During the journey by rail his mind had been actively at work as to his course of action under the unexpected circumstances of Mrs. Clifford's sudden death.

He had no doubt whatever in his own mind that Judith Swaine had committed suicide, as the only means of escape from her perilous and unenviable position; and now that Paul had had time to reflect, he was more at a loss than ever what plea he should adopt with which to approach Mr. Clifford. He even doubted whether, under the circumstances, he would be permitted to enter the Farm, although his dead wife lay under its roof. Of one fact he was quite certain—not one penny would he obtain. Of what utility, then, was his hurried journey to Cliff Farm?

Presently the tall chimneys of the old Clifford homestead hove in sight.

Beneath that roof lay the dead body of the once lovely Judith Swaine.

In spite of himself, the gold-digger could not help giving utterance to a sigh as he recalled the lovely bride of three-and-twenty whom he had married at Denver twelve years before. And now Clifford would rejoice at the permanent severance of a hated tie and marry the lovely Caroline Balfour.

Paul felt that he hated his late host with an undying hate. All the fierce slumbering passions of his nature were aroused as he reflected on his own blank and dreary prospects, and contrasted the different prospects of Henry Clifford.

It was now growing dusk, and, in addition, a thick, white mist was rising from the sea, and promised soon to envelop the cliffs themselves.

Occasionally Paul had to take a long step as he came to a crevice in the cliff, some three feet in width, at the bottom of which, a hundred feet below, was the deep sea.

He had now arrived within a quarter of a mile of Cliff Farm, and still he hesitated and pondered as to his course of action. Meanwhile, the sea-fog became more dense every minute.

Paul had just decided to return to Trugo when he perceived the tall figure of a man walking toward him.

It must be Mr. Clifford.

Paul peered keenly through the evening mist.

Yes, it was he himself! Instinctively, the hand of Paul wandered to his breast-pocket, and drew forth his pet revolver, which he had showed to Mr. Wickham when they had first dined together.

One pull at the trigger, and all Clifford's plans, and visions of future happiness would be dissolved into thin air. Then it flashed across the mind of Paul that he would infallibly have valuables on his person. And money was life itself to Paul in his present impecunious position.

Slowly he raised the pistol, a sharp report was heard, and the man turned round unhurt. For the first time in his life Paul had missed his mark; and now, in spite of the mist, Paul perceived that it was not Clifford, but one of the servants, at the farm. The gold digger turned on his heel and fled!

Along the verges of the cliff Paul Swaine sped on his course, at a pace which bade defiance to pursuit. After he had covered about two hundred yards, he turned his head to see if he was followed, but there were no signs of a pursuer.

He was inwardly congratulating himself, when the earth seemed to give way beneath him, and he went down, down, till he fell into the boiling surf below.

He had fallen into a crevasse. Paul Swaine struggled violently and desperately for a few moments, then the movements ceased, and the broad and deep waters of the Atlantic claimed him for their prey!

CHAPTER XI.

WEDDING BELLS.

It is six months after the death of the ill-fated Judith Swaine, and already people have ceased to talk about it, and it is faded into the history of the past.

It is autumn, and sitting on the terrace of Penwyn House, overlooking the garden, are Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Wickham. They have been conversing on a variety of topics, with evidently one subject on each of their minds, that subject being the proposal of marriage from Mr. Wickham to Mrs. Hughes. Wickham fully intends to make that proposal this morning, and Mrs. Hughes as fully expects it.

"You say you have not heard from Mr. Clifford lately?"

"Not since he wrote to me from Naples," replied Wickham. "But he intended to return to America in six months, and that time has nearly expired."

"I suppose he will now marry his first love, or I should say his second love, Miss Caroline Balfour?"

"I hope so, as soon as the customary year of mourning is over."

"How little does the world suspect that Mrs. Clifford, or as I should say, Judith Swaine, was not his legal wife!"

"No; the secret is known only to few people—Mr. Clifford, yourself, and Euphemia and myself. Certainly there is a fifth person—the redoubtable Paul. I think your daughter deserves great credit for keeping the secret so well. I must confess I doubted her capacity for so doing, owing to her vivacious and excitable temperament."

Mrs. Hughes bridled up slightly.

"Ah! you don't know Euphemia, Mr. Wickham!"

Wickham gently stole his hand to her little plump fingers as he softly murmured:

"Perhaps some day I shall know her better, dear Mrs. Hughes."

The lady mentally exclaimed, with an increased beating of the heart and a heightened pulse:

"Now it is coming!"

"Euphemia will, I hope, some day be my daughter—will she not, Ellen?"

Mrs. Hughes went through the customary blushing, and looking down, and turning of the head aside, as practiced some thirteen years ago on the departed iron-merchant.

"I hardly understand you, Mr. Wickham!"

"Yes, you do; pardon me for contradicting you! I just now called you Ellen. My name is Adolphus—my intimate friends call me Dolly. Say, 'Yes, Dolly, I consent to be your wife!'"

"But this is so unexpected—I was so unprepared for it!"

"Surely not, Ellen? Even at Cliff Farm you must have seen my partiality for your beloved society? Do you not remember that walk home over the rocks and stones, when I had to assist you in order to escape the coming storm? I nearly proposed to you then, dear Ellen!"

Well did the widow remember that delightful *tete-a-tete* journey, and how she momentarily expected the soft confession.

She was resolved not to allow the present chance to escape her for she sincerely admired and loved Mr. Wickham, apart from the natural pride she would experience in being his wife.

So, after a few more warm speeches from her lover, she turned toward him, allowed her pretty head to fall on his shoulder, while she whispered, "Yes, Dolly, I consent to be your wife!"

Then breaking away after her future husband had imprinted a kiss of gratitude on her ruby lips, Mrs. Hughes rushed into the house, where she found Euphemia occupied in painting a landscape in water-colors.

"Euphemia, listen to me, and put down those tiresome colors. I have such news for you—you will be surprised!"

Euphemia calmly applied a fresh tint to a waterfall, and, without looking at her mother,

exclaimed, "Has Mr. Wickham proposed, mamma, at last?"

Mrs. Hughes opened her bright, blue eyes to their widest extent.

"Goodness, gracious, child! have you been doing any more listening? And what do you mean by 'at last!'"

"Because, mamma, I have been expecting the news these six months, and I am not the only person who was getting impatient. All the servants talk of it."

"Well, Phemie, dear, you are pleased, are you not? You like your new papa?"

Miss Hughes rose from her chair, and, kissing her mother on both cheeks, said:

"I like Mr. Wickham very much, and congratulate you sincerely, mamma, and wish you every happiness. But you ought not to accuse me of listening as a fault. Where would poor Mr. Clifford be if I had not listened to those wicked people in the cave that day?"

Mrs. Hughes embraced her daughter.

"You are quite right, Euphemia; we are all very much indebted to you."

We must now follow the fortunes of Harry Clifford.

Soon after the funeral obsequies of Judith Swaine he left home, and started on a tour which extended as far as Algeria. He longed for peace and rest.

We do not assert for a moment that he was afflicted with any very profound grief at the death of the once-loved Judith; but her death seemed to obliterate the period intervening between the happy days at Brussels and that terrible day when she was found cold and dead in the chamber at Cliff Farm.

A feeling akin to pity was kindled in his breast, and he hoped and prayed this feeling would endure, so that he might hold her memory green, without any taint of bitterness.

There was one subject which troubled him much—whether he should confide the mystery of the connection between him and Judith Swaine to Caroline Balfour.

It is useless to deny that among the first thoughts which rose unprompted on the death of Judith was the thought that now he was a free man to wed his heart's idol, the lovely Caroline Balfour!

But the ordinary decencies of custom and society prescribed that some period should elapse ere he renewed his wooing with his former love; so he resolved to go abroad for about six months, and then return home, and, if he found it necessary, relate some portion of the sad and melancholy story of Judith Swaine to Caroline.

Accordingly, in the autumn of the year in which Judith died, Clifford arrived at New York.

The train to Cornwall did not start for two hours; so he went to the "Metropolitan Hotel," and endeavored to pass the time in perusing the New York newspapers, which he had not seen for several weeks.

Suddenly his eye encountered the following paragraph in one of the society papers:

"We have good reason to believe that a marriage is on the tapis between Miss Caroline Balfour, the lovely and accomplished daughter of General Balfour, and young Hatch, son of the wealthy Wall street broker of that name."

The journal fell from the trembling hands of Clifford!

Had he returned home for this? Fool that he had been, not to fly from the mourning bier of Judith to the feet of his beloved Caroline! How could he expect that so fair and lovely a flower should be allowed to bloom ungathered on the stem, amid wealthy and handsome admirers, eager to place such a gem in their treasure-house?

Was it not natural for Caroline to suppose that he had long since ceased to love her? Would not his six months' silence warrant such a conclusion?

Then Clifford, as he sat overwhelmed with this new trial, canvassed whether he should not take ship once more, and sail for regions

where the name of Balfour was unknown. But as the hour approached for the departure of the train for Cornwall, an irresistible desire took possession of him to gaze once more on the lovely features of Caroline Balfour.

Yes; he would not only return to Maplewood, but he would call at Balfour House; he would, in person, congratulate the faithless Caroline on her approaching marriage. Surely, after the trials he had already undergone, he could face manfully this last bitter calamity.

In due course he arrived at Maplewood. The house had been "swept and garnished;" everything was bright and cheerful to welcome the young master back to his old home.

Sincere smiles beamed on the countenances of the numerous servants. But, while gracefully acknowledging his kindly welcome, Harry's heart yearned and ached for the welcome of one loving heart, in comparison with which all else counted as naught.

Who can paint the desolation of that solitary evening as he dined alone in the gorgeous dining-room of Maplewood? But he was firmly resolved to face a more acute trial on the morrow. He would see Caroline!

Soon after midday Clifford started for Balfour House. He was ushered into the drawing-room. The servant informed him that General Balfour was from home, but that Miss Caroline would be with him shortly. He had hoped to see the general first, but events rarely happen as we anticipate.

At all events, in a few minutes his last trial would be over. Fate had no further power over him. Death he would welcome with joy and thankfulness.

A well-known step, light as a fairy, sounded in his ear, the rustle of a silk dress, and Caroline entered the room.

At a glance he saw that she was thinner and paler than of yore. Caroline advanced with a trembling step, and held out her hand, while her eye eagerly sought his own for some signs of tenderness and love. But no love met her gaze in those cold, dark eyes—no symptom of tenderness could be found in those stern, impassive features.

Clifford took the hand of Caroline within his own, and scarcely pressing the snowy fingers, uttered a hope that Miss Balfour was in good health.

It was impossible for her to misunderstand that glance and those cold, heartless tones.

Caroline had not expected that a bereaved husband, six months after his wife's death, would rush into her arms, and propose marriage on the spot. But she judged by her own heart, and expected some response would betray itself in the handsome features of her former lover.

Presently, in a low tone, she uttered the words:

"I am glad to see you looking so well. You have traveled much since—since the spring?"

"Yes; I have just returned from Algeria. You are not looking so strong as formerly?"

"No," replied Caroline, making strenuous efforts to keep down the rising tears; "I have had much trouble since we parted."

All the firmness of Clifford melted away at the sight of beauty in tears—of his beloved Caroline in distress. He advanced, and taking her hand, said: "What trouble can have visited thy young heart?"

Caroline turned upon him a glance almost reproachful in its gaze.

"Can you ask me, Harry?"

Clifford fell back a pace or two, surprised that she should address him by his Christian name—she who was so shortly to become the bride of another.

"At least, you will shortly be amply consoled for all past trouble by your approaching marriage?"

Caroline bent upon him a look of unfeigned wonder.

"My marriage! To what marriage do you allude?"

"To your marriage with Charlie Hatch."

"Charlie Hatch! I do not think I have seen him three times in the course of my life!"

"Once probably was enough so far as he was concerned?"

It was a vulgar compliment, but Clifford could not forbear the retort.

Caroline paused to consider, apparently dumfounded.

"I confess I do not understand you!"

"Are you not engaged to be married to young Hatch?"

"No—on my honor, no!" replied Caroline, with all the emphasis of truth.

The words were scarcely formed on her lips when Harry had clasped her in his arms; and with his mouth close to hers, his eyes looking almost fiercely into her own, was pouring forth words thick and fast, telling her how he had never ceased to love her—how he had counted the minutes till the time had arrived for them to meet again; and how he hoped she would consent to be his wife at the earliest opportunity which circumstances would permit.

And she—how did Caroline behave? What answer did she make to this passionate avowal?

She lay in his fond arms, listening to the dear words of love and affection, smiling faintly through her tears, content though Time itself should stand still, so those blissful moments might be prolonged.

But answer she made none.

What need was there of reply when love beamed from her eyes, and consent was written in every feature of her face?

Presently they were sitting side by side, her hand fondly clasped in his, and he told her how he had read in a public print the announcement of her engagement.

"And you believed an anonymous statement in a society journal?" interrupted Caroline, playfully. "I thought my Harry was more a man of the world. I am not sure whether I ought not to be very angry with you for trusting me so little."

Harry made his peace somehow, and then they talked as if time was coming to an end, and they were anxious to unbosom themselves while they had the opportunity.

But a compulsory stop was put to their converse by the entrance of General Balfour.

We will pass over the hearty welcome accorded to Clifford, the joy and unconcealed gratification displayed by the old soldier when Clifford renewed his offer of marriage to the daughter of General Balfour.

Clifford remained to dinner that evening.

There were only three at table, but no additional guest was required to complete the joy of the happy trio that night.

Six months more have rolled away, and the customary year of mourning is over.

It is spring again, and for the second time Clifford is spending his bridal eve with his beloved Caroline.

They are sitting side by side mechanically turning over the leaves of a gorgeously-bound book, illustrative of the wonders of Italian art.

Suddenly they are mutually reminded of the strange coincidence—so were they engaged on that fatal evening nearly eighteen months ago, on the night of Judith's return. Their eyes expressed the thought.

"Caroline," exclaimed Harry, "let us agree to look upon the months which have intervened since our last bridal eve as an episode in our existence to be buried in oblivion—as a hideous and uneasy dream. Then it was December, with its gloom and snow; now it is April, with its sunshine and showers. Spring is ever a hopeful time. You have no fears for the future now—no presentiments?"

Caroline threw her arms round his neck, and with her candid and loving eyes bent upon his own, so full of confidence in a happy future, exclaimed, "I have no fears, no presentiments, dear Harry!"

And as Harry listened to these words, he felt from the bottom of his heart that his trials were past.

THE END.

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